



WHITE ALBUM 2

White Album 2 Omake

The Snow Melts, And Until The Snow Falls

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Notes

- It is recommended that this story be read after playing "WHITE ALBUM 2 -introductory chapter" **once**, and then the reader should play the introductory chapter again.
- This story does not contain any spoilers, but could contain foreshadowing for the introductory chapter.
- In the PS3 version, this story is unlocked by clearing the introductory chapter once.

Prologue: "Two Years Ago"

Touma Kazusa hated the sky.

In the spring, she skipped the School of Houjou University entrance ceremony with such darkness clouding her mind that she spurned it with disinterest. She laid on the grounds where she'd be commuting and gazed upon the clear blue skies.

Several days ago, Kazusa's mother had informed her they'd be parting ways.

Youko was the only blood relative of hers, and as she'd keep rambling on and on, she had learned Youko was flying off to Europe to perform.

Ever since she was a child, Youko had only gone to competitions. Never once had she made Kazusa any sort of lunch. Certainly the house was empty when she went off on concert tours. Kazusa knew half of that was actually performing, and the other half was running away on honeymoons.

Even so, she hadn't held any kind of dissatisfaction in this prodigy of a mother.

This was because for half of the year, Youko would be patting her head, talking about her own feats in concerts as they ate at the dining table.

This was because she'd believed her mother had needed her. That she'd loved her from the bottom of her heart.

Until...

"There's no meaning in bringing you with me as you are now."

The moment these merciless words came from her own mother, it was as if the Touma Kazusa that had lived up until now had disappeared, even though she still went by the name of Touma Kazusa.

The new Touma Kazusa was not needed by the world.

Of course this wasn't the reality of it all, but rather something Kazusa had come to believe herself. Considering she was still in the middle of puberty though, it was something quite harsh to take at this kind of time.

Since then, the voices Kazusa heard, their expressions, their emotions...

The color, sounds, smell, taste, feeling of living things and just about everything else had some sort of hidden meaning behind them. To Kazusa, they all meant some sort of ill-will; that they were sneering at her, or that they were watching her. Still, she had learned to ignore it all.

That's why at this very moment, as Kazusa looked up at the sprawling sky, she hated it all.

It was a lot better than hating her mother.

Touma Kazusa hated the teachers.

The day following the school ceremony after school, one of the female teachers in the music department greeted her with a rather simple yet unpleasant smile, as she guided her to the third floor of the outer building.

A brand-new grand piano had been enshrined in the second music room, with the words "Donated by Touma Youko" engraved on its plate. The golden sparkles coming from this engraving reflected in such a way it caused Kazusa to wince.

The female teacher went chattering on about how the music department of the School of Houjou University were expecting so much from her. Kazusa sighed as the teacher promised she'd get the best treatment for all music activities.

So Kazusa immediately got to work.

"I'm going to be practicing now, so leave already," she said.

Though the teacher was angered, Kazusa figured that if she suppressed her rude attitude and remained polite and kind like she always was, the relationship between the two of them would improve from hereon after.

However, the black-spectacled teacher in her mid-thirties rolled her eyes, and soon returned a rather unpleasant smile in a hurry. She recklessly remarked, *"Then, once you're done, come to the staff room for the key to lock the door."*

Because of that, Kazusa started to develop a negative image of the *"adult demeanor"*, associating it with the teacher supervising her as well as all of the management staff. This transformed into contempt towards them all, in spite of not knowing any of them.

Because it was annoying to differentiate between friends and enemies.

Touma Kazusa hated the students.

After a bit of time had passed since the entrance ceremony, once classes began, she started talking to a male student during practice hours. Going by the name of Matsukawa Takanori, both of them had a history of entering

competitions and taking the top ranks. They'd talk about it, and in the spring of the following month when the two were selected for the next competition, they'd again talk about it. Kazusa treated him indifferently, not remembering the first half of what they'd discussed and not finding any meaning in the other half.

Matsukawa never expected her to fire back at him, taking that attitude of hers and forcibly warping it into some sort of ill will, and even tried hard to keep this sort of thing running with her.

At any rate, it was like he didn't see any reason for her to hate herself.

He didn't see any reason to doubt they were ideal partners, subscribing to the theory that "excellence breeds excellence", able to grow together not only in skill with the piano, but as human beings as well. The same also held true for her.

This one-sided turn of events ran on for a while, and then an incident happened.

As the two loitered around in a classroom in the evening...

Though no one had witnessed the events leading up to the incident, Matsukawa was left in a cold sweat, slouching over and writhing in pain. It was as if Kazusa was brushing off an uncomfortable feeling in her feet, tossing the desks and seats all over the place.

Speaking of which, Kazusa was a pianist who never used her fists, so aiming for the nether regions wasn't really a difficult thing to pull off.

At any rate, the chaos in that incident was treated more as something that couldn't be blamed on either of the two, rather than the school being lenient.

However... or rather, to say whose fault it was, Kazusa had ruined her image in the eyes of the classmates in the music department, even though a month hadn't even passed.

That's why Kazusa hated all the students in the classroom.

Besides, she particularly hated Matsukawa's overly large ego, and on top of that, there was no one to talk with her since then.

And then one month later, in the competition in the spring of the following month.

It was no exaggeration to say that, despite not even two months having passed, the school and board chairmen, vice principal and year head all spoke highly of her since her victory.

As always, the homeroom teacher was sucking up to the superiors with an unpleasant smile.

The seniors that survived until the final screening all hung their heads in shame at that competition, clapping mechanically.

And there wasn't a single student in her year... no first year student that came to cheer her on.

In just the span of two months, Kazusa's world had been so jarred, torn apart, and isolated.

Even so, those unpleasant feelings came at her from all directions. While taking her certificate of merit with a blank expression, she silently interrupted

their praise, and ran away from that place with her trophy and certificate, ignoring people as they tried to hold her back.

At the time, she didn't gain any delight, achievement, anger, or emptiness; just nothing; a completely flat feeling.

Or so she thought.

Kazusa didn't remember much that night since coming back home and opening the door.

Nor did she remember opening the air package that had arrived, nor the stuffed dog that was inside, nor the card inside that said, "Happy Birthday", nor the fact her victory in the competition came the week after her birthday, nor the round eyes in the stuffed dog right in front of her...

Nor did she remember herself crying out, nor the fact the present from her mother was delayed by a week, nor that she ripped apart the stuffed dog with her nails and threw it everywhere, nor that her vision began to blur, nor that she could no longer hold in the words expressing the horrible feelings overflowing in her heart, nor that she was convinced she had nothing left, nothing at all, really, just about nothing...

The day following Kazusa's victory, her face appeared in the local newspaper covering the story.

Of course, the name "Touma Youko" did show up about five times in the headlines, but Kazusa didn't find such an article like this, nor did she attempt to even look for it.

Touma Kazusa came to hate the piano.

At the time, hating the piano was the same thing as hating the entire world.

Chapter 1: "Spring"

"Touma!"

"....."

She was watching a dream.

It was such a bad dream where undesirable memories swirled in her mind like a revolving lantern.

"Touma... hey... sorry to bug you, but wake up for a bit."

"... hmm?"

And being abruptly awoken like that was also the worst. It irritated Kazusa to the point of being angered at the person, despite the fact she should be grateful.

"...!"

"...?"

Opening her eyes, Kazusa glared at the male student in uniform that stood before her.

... at the very least, she could tell he had a stiff expression.

"....."

Slowly, the information pouring into her mind one by one; that she was looking at a dream from two years ago, that she was now in her third year, that it was the sixth period... no, judging from the noise around her, it was finally after school.

"..... zzz..."

Though it all hit her, there happened to be a male student fixated in front of her. Since it was a pain to lift her head up at him, she once again laid down on her desk...

"Ahh!? Sorry, really! You're Touma Kazusa, right?"

"... mm~..."

Once woken again, her temper started to turn sour.

Kazusa finally gave the male student a look. Because of the fact she was half-awake from her dream, she didn't really feel all that great.

"You haven't attended school since the graduation ceremony, yeah? Are you doing all right?"

"... wha?"

To be honest... she didn't have any kind of first impression of him.

His height, his stature, his hair, and his figure weren't anything noteworthy.

"I'm asking because the deadline's rather close for the application forms for your school textbooks and student card."

If there was anything to point out about him, it was that the top button on his shirt was undone.

"I do realize that classes aren't really progressing while you've been sleeping, but you're going to miss out on a lot of details..."

"....."

Hiding her eyes as if she were scowling for the first time, she noticed he was watching his attitude and words rather carefully.

It was just that, because he'd been making eye contact with her, Kazusa felt uncomfortable as she'd never make eye contact with anyone else.



"Oh and also... the student discount form's here, just in case. You go by train from Iwazuchou, right?"

"....."

Not taking his eyes off her, he piled up a bunch of books and papers on top of her desk.

"And, this is the one thing you shouldn't forget; the parent-teacher meeting printout. It's starting right next week, so be sure to pass this to your parent."

"Parent..."

"I was hoping to bring this directly to your house, but I had a lot of things come up... sorry about that."

"....."

These words really got on her nerves, coming from someone who knew nothing about her circumstances.

Her temper soured even further, especially knowing that he didn't mean any harm in saying them.

That apology of his nagged her so much it was irritating.

In other words, nothing in front of her had her interest one bit.

"Do you have any questions about anything I've said? I'll try to answer what I can, though."

Though the way he spoke just continued to make things more annoying for her, Kazusa merely shook her head.

She did so since it was a bother to do all this studying stuff for the past two years, compared to the hate she had for everything that annoyed her since enrolling.

"I see, that's good. Then..."

"Sigh..."

"... I'll next explain how to fill out these forms. First, we'll start with the form for buying the school jersey."

"....."

Even so, since the boy in front of her had the nerve to come, Kazusa no longer felt the will to compromise with the words, *"I have no questions"*.

"... what's wrong?"

"..... oying..."

"Hmm?"

"You're annoying."

He really was annoying.

I even went through the trouble of not pushing this negativity onto other people.

And I even went with the idea of "arguing with people is a pain" to avoid getting into situations with others.

"Many tell me that, but this is important. If I'm annoying you, I'm sure remembering all this will help."

"....."

Even so... even so...

Who the hell does he think he is? This guy in front of me sure is rude and oppressive. He can't even tell when to shut up.

"Ah... that's right. This is the first time we've met. I'm Kitahara Haruki, the first term representative for class E."

"I didn't ask for your name."

"Well, your face seemed to ask, *"Just who are you?"*, see."

"...!"

I don't know his name either. Or rather, even if I did hear it now, I don't feel like remembering it...

"... maybe you really aren't feeling well after all? Do you want to go to the nurse's office? I'll take you there."

"... don't come near me."

"Hm? I haven't touched you anywhere yet."

"....."

Is he so conceited to think that a mere pebble on the roadside such as himself could become an obstacle in my life? Despite not having the size, weight, or sharpness to roll about in my path?

It had been quite a while since Kazusa had gotten so riled up...

"... all right, never mind. Oh, of course! If you'd like, I could walk you home after school..."

"Don't come near me!"

Her voice erupted in an instant.

"... sigh..."

Kazusa left through the school gates on her own, as the sunlight of spring slowly began to hide the cold of winter from not too long ago. The beauty from her tight lips, narrowed eyes, and the bridge of her nose projected an anger that she hadn't had in so long.

Though the reason why this beautiful yet frightening expression of hers was over something so childish, the passer-byes had no reason to pry into it.

"This is all his fault..."

Everyone, including the male student, were left with their mouths open the moment Kazusa slammed the classroom door open. They all watched her as she abruptly left in such a violent way.

The students in the music classrooms had seen this sort of episode up until last year, and this year it had also happened without any real motive.

As such, she hadn't any idea why she switched to a regular curriculum in the first place.

It was a new class where no one knew her and she knew no one. This time, Kazusa was pondering whether to graduate in such tedious, boring days, and even though she restrained herself to a great extent, the result still ended up the same.

That's why Kazusa despaired as always.

Probably because nothing would change in the end.

Probably because in this closed world called the School of Houjou University, there wasn't a single person who would understand her, approve of her, or let her be.

... even though such excuses created friction between her and those around her, since no one was close to Kazusa in the first place, they just treated this like some sort of annual ritual without any kind of ruckus.

It had already been two years since the enrollment ceremony where she looked up at the skies...

As always, Touma Kazusa hated them.

She hated the skies in such a spring season, where the thin, white clouds spread apart.

She hated the teachers, the students, and pretty much the world around her.

At the time, she had a reason to hate just about everything she saw.

That's why to Touma Kazusa... she hated the all too friendly male student she met today.

There are three music rooms in the School of Houjou University.

The first music room in the main school building is used by the music students during lessons and by music clubs after school.

The third music room in the new school building is used exclusively by the music department staff throughout the day, and placed in a location that isolates it from the other students.

And then there's the second music room.

It's right beside the first music room, and was once used exclusively by the music department staff. Right now, not even classes or clubs use the room even though it's been turned into a classroom.

Normally, students in music clubs would use the room once they closed down for the day, but there was a reason, and it didn't involve any kind of dissatisfaction from the students or the teachers.

And it wasn't anything like some urban legend, one of the seven wonders, or some school ghost story at all. It was merely a bunch of things people concluded upon that ended up with this result.

The regular students were under the impression the room was being used by the music students.

The music students no longer needed that music room.

And the teachers... evade the topic when asked.

The piano echoed with brilliance in that music room, even today.

It's been a week since the opening ceremonies for this school term. Despite becoming a third year and changing education paths, in the end, Kazusa remained the sole owner of the room... as the *"Second Music Room Owner"*, which has never been used during classes or after school.

Someone began playing the guitar solo for the song, *"Highway Star"* within the echoes of the piano.

Kazusa was first brought here in the spring two years ago.

This was the same day she chased away the homeroom teacher that led her here, she occupied the room, definitively bearing the name, *"Problem child that hides behind the donation of a famous parent"*.

Since then, no one has ever set foot within the room. The grand piano, donated by her mother, was made from a European company worth more than three million yen. And yet, it ended up being used by only Kazusa.

She never returned the key back to the staff room, only coming and leaving whenever she felt like it, playing any musical instrument inside as she pleased.

The guitar began playing *"Crazy Train"*.

Since the competition two years ago, Kazusa never went on stage.

Besides, ever since that day, Kazusa stopped playing the piano for leisure.

That's why today's practice was not for fun, but merely a habit.

She didn't improve her technique, nor did she notice missing any keys, nor did she lament over her technique worsening, she just kept playing on and on without thinking.

She just played wholeheartedly without any ill will, without any pain, and without any sadness from that day, as if to erase it all.

At the same time, she erased the fun and happy memories she had, but she hadn't any need to worry about it.

Because she didn't have any fun or happy memories at all recently...

The guitar began playing "*WHITE ALBUM*"...

"Ahh~, damn it!"

However, on that day, without thinking, Kazusa slammed on the piano so as to give up.

Of course, it wasn't because she despaired over her skill in playing the piano...

"This sound is garbage!"

The guitar being played was so off-key and inexperienced, she couldn't forgive it at all.

She'd been hearing it for the past several days.

After the practice from the wind instruments and choruses in the first room ended, it seemed like there was someone practicing on their own personal time. But because the guitar solo was so off-key, it ruined Kazusa's flow with the piano.

To be honest, it was the worst.

It was probably some new student that was intent on entering the university band. But for whatever reason it was, Kazusa wanted to forgive the student to the greatest extent she could.

Thanks to that, her own performance was ruined, and having lost the feeling in her fingertips, Kazusa lost interest in continuing to perform.

"I'm going home..."

As expected, the guitar continued to play "*WHITE ALBUM*" with mistakes.

Kazusa finally decided to close her ears with both her hands, and dash as far away as possible, so as not to hear the noise.

Her brain was dead tired on the way home, so she decided to bring it back to health with large quantities of sugar...

Touma Kazusa loved nameraka pudding.

Or rather, she loved every bit of flavor in the pudding.

Maybe she got it from her mother who loved sweet things to death, or maybe because her mother fed her such things resulting in this. Kazusa continued to fight this dental battle of hers on a grand scale ever since she was a child up until now.

Well, a little bit changed.

... she recently became a little more indulged in sweet things.

She wasn't good with spicy food at all ever since she was a kid, and the same held true for bitter, sour, and hot foods. Cold food was exempt from this recently, but in terms of meal choices, this left very little to select from.

She'd take ice cream, cake, pudding, lemon tea, milk tea, fruit juice, and carbonated drinks...

She would take coffee, but she'd have to put in large amounts of cream and sugar. Otherwise she wouldn't be able to bear the bitter flavor piercing through her throat.

None of this has changed at present.

But if some counselor or psychiatrist happened to examine her, they'd probably notice this all had a dramatic effect in the dark depths of her heart.

Kazusa herself doesn't even know her brain has been telling her these things.

That she shouldn't agitate her esteemed sense of taste.

That she shouldn't torment the tip of her esteemed tongue.

"One more, please."

"..... v-very well."

Though unrelated, Kazusa was eating two of the nameraka puddings, and had decided on a third.

There's nothing to care much for in the variety, ingredients, or price of pudding, but this place... the Minamisetsugu Goodies Restaurant was particularly recommended for its nameraka pudding.

Kazusa couldn't stop the smile on her face nor the spoon in her hands. Besides, the nameraka pudding in this store was so good, there was really no point going to any other place.

She was determined to not show anyone from the school this faint, blissful expression of hers as she took her last spoon, when...

"I'm telling you, don't think about it too much. Everyone's just going there to have fun!"

She heard a voice from just behind she recently became familiar with.

"Is that how you play this off now? You've been inviting girls like this second year, Iizuka-kun!"

"Well... but you were going out with Takada weren't you, Yui-chan?"

"... you sure know your stuff."

"Because you've always eyed him, see. I was a bit shocked when I heard you got a boyfriend."

And familiar words that set her teeth on edge.

"I see, and then recently I got some new info... that you two broke up."

"... you're quite a pain."

Turning around so as to not be noticed, Kazusa found a couple dressed in Houjou uniforms having a chat.

Though she only got half the details right, she did recognize the guy.

"What, thought you could make your move now? That you could get something going on?"

"Get something on? I'm all for that!"

"And if I said my standards weren't so low?"

"Even got those words going! I'm all for that!"

"You sure are good, aren't you, Iizuka-kun. I heard plenty of things from Sawachan about you."

"Want to see if what she's said is true?"

The thin figure, light brown hair, and soft voice made Kazusa recall some not so great memories from the day before.

At the time when she was heading home through the school gates, there was a guy that was annoying her.

"You're Touma-san from class E, right?"

"I'm Iizuka Takeya from class G. You know me, yes?"

"How about Haruki... Kitahara Haruki? You know, the guy sitting next to you."

"I'm his friend, see. He told me a bit about you."

"Just well, see. Thought I'd talk to you, get to know you a bit better."

"Man, I was so surprised! Who knew that someone with such finesse would be in our year... made the blunder of your life or something?"

"Where you heading off to? If you got time, we can go for some tea or something!"

"Ah~, don't think too hard about it or anything. I just wanna talk!"

"... you're the strong, silent type, aren't you?"

"You were in the music curriculum until last year, right? Kinda rare for someone to switch to the regular curriculum."

"Oh that's right, you're Touma Youko's..."

And he'd go on and on like that with her, but soon that loose tongue of his would fade.

... after tasting Kazusa's wide kick.

"Hm... let's see~, If it's not just the two of us, then I'm fine with that."

"Oh, I'm all for that too! I'm cool with a group!"

"Then, what do you wanna do? Wanna go somewhere on Golden Week?"

Still, today's catch of his appears to be a lot better than what happened the other day.

He took a seat facing Kazusa— it wasn't what she was quite expecting. Though she thought it strange, they were actually two seats away— as the two chatted away, it seemed like they were starting to enjoy it.

In other words, he got a hit.

"Then how about the third day? 10 AM in front of the Minamisuetsugu ticket gate?"

"Then go ahead and invite someone. I'll give a call after you're done."

"Okay, let's exchange numbers."

Kazusa was becoming uncomfortable and growing a foul mood as the two chatted the day away. She moved to switch seats without being noticed when...

"Ehh~, Kitahara-kun? Well, you see..."

A familiar name stopped her in her tracks.

"Eh, why?"

"Well, Kitahara-kun's... that Mr. Class Representative, right?"

Continuing from yesterday, she once again hears this name.

The first male student to talk to her in class.

A rather annoying student who can't take a hint.

A particular classmate who would stubbornly go on, who should've left her alone in class.

Who's a friend of this useless guy.

This guy, who's a complete sellout.

This blasphemy who would go through the trouble of looking up the fact she was Touma Youko's daughter.

And she could tell right away from being close to him that he was just the worst.

And just like that, Kazusa's anger directed itself more towards the name "*Kitahara Haruki*" far more than the guy in front of her.

Towards the person where her first impression came up with, "*It's all his fault*"...

"But you know, inviting him is kinda pitiful."

"Why? Something wrong with that?"

"... you know, right?"

— — *I know all too well.*

"He doesn't look all that bad, does he? It's okay, I'll fix him up with some clothes or something."

"Uh, it's not that he looks bad or anything. But he's not gonna annoy us, is he?"

"....."

— — *He is annoying. Very annoying.*

"A while back he suddenly came to my house, you know? He said he knew it from the address book."

— — *He'd be one to do that sort of thing.*

"Weren't you absent from school that day? Or maybe you forgot something at school?"

"Well, I did absent. The day before I went to a live concert as far as the stage."

"Isn't that just visiting sick people, then?"

"Still though, doesn't he have any manners?"

— — *That's right, he just barges in like it's his own business.*

"He went in? Or maybe he even went for some tea?"

"He went home right away... but still."

— — *But, still.*

The only thing I have is hatred for him...

"..... sorry, something came up, gotta go."

"Eh?"

"... eh?"

The words in her heart happened to spill out by accident.

Because that loose tongue of his suddenly became rather reserved.

"This is my share. I had fun today, later."

"W-Wait a second, Iizuka-kun!"

The girl moved to try and stop him, perhaps because she felt the same way.

"We still haven't figured out where we're going yet! Who are you gonna be inviting?"

"Ah~, I was talking about that, wasn't I...?"

"What do you mean by that...?"

"Sorry, something really came up. Maybe next time."

However, he didn't have any interest in listening to her words any longer.

"... what're you angry about?"

"Just letting you know."

"Eh...?"

"It's only been two weeks since you two ended up in the same class, right? You shouldn't be talking about Haruki like that."

"W... what are you talking about?"

Really, what is he talking about?

It's not strange for someone to visit an absent student even though it's only been two weeks since they ended up in the same class?

"You should know him for at least half a year. Later."

"Wait a second, you're all strange all of a sudden, Iizuka-kun! Hey, come on, I said wait!"

"...!"

"Iizuka-kun" soon ran past Kazusa.

But even if she hid, he wouldn't have noticed her. He left with an expression that indicated his loss of interest in that girl.

Which was why Kazusa didn't take her eyes off him.

"... what the hell, are you an idiot?!"

Perhaps the words this girl spoke were the same words Kazusa spoke on that day.

She was curious because, this girl wasn't even speaking for her. And yet, the words coming from the girl were precisely the same.

Which was why Kazusa could understand; or rather, she felt the same way.

A fiery flame of humiliation that you couldn't put out with ice or water.

And yet again, it was another feeling she carried towards this class representative named *"Kitahara Haruki"*.

"Touma!"

"....."

She was watching a dream.

A complicated dream that could neither be called the best or the worst. It was like an ant drowning in honey.

"Touma... hey... come on, wake up!"

"... hmm?"

Kazusa woke up wiping tears from her eyes, having been released from the ultimate decision of choosing between her life and sugar, and faced the person who brought her back to reality.

"Good morning. Rare to see you come to class early."

"..... haa..."

"You don't have to make your sigh all that obvious."

I'm not sighing. I'm just gulping down air in a hurry because this "Kitahara Haruki" is talking to me.

How many years has it been since I remembered someone's full name?

"..... ughh..."

"Good morning! Good morning, Touma! The bell will ring soon, so please, wake up!"

"Mmm... mmmph..."

She was half-bluffing with her sleeping when being talked to, or stretching herself as if she was being bothered and had no interest, but half of it all was a bluff.

Because she didn't want anyone else causing her grief or bothering her any longer.

... but, she really didn't want him to notice that she had taken just a slight interest in him.

"Look, I'm sorry for waking you up, but the career counseling form is due at lunch today."

"..... huh..."

"I'll be collecting them for the teacher. I figured you probably threw out the form, so here's a new one. Just put your name down in the right spot there."

Bothering me with such obvious stuff. A kindness that ticks me off. Obviously very annoying.

When compared to her experience with the adults swarming over the Touma family's standing, fame, or assets, this was quite similar.

"I won't look at what it is you're writing. It'll go straight in the envelope, and I won't look inside at all. So, well, please finish it before lunch."

Even so, despite Kazusa knowing that he didn't really have anything to gain from this, it still made her uncomfortable.

"Come on, don't roll it up. Just write something."

"I'm not interested in this."

Which was why she took on a defiant attitude.

Not like the light attitude he took with him a month ago that let him do anything, but a completely defiant one.

"It doesn't matter if you're going to university or finding work or you haven't decided. Just put whatever it is you're thinking about."

"Besides, if you're so interested in bothering me, why don't you go collect everyone else's forms..."

"I picked everyone else's forms up yesterday. Only yours remains."

"... there were about three people absent yesterday weren't there?"

"I gave them a phone call and picked them up. They filled them up, even though they caught a cold."

"... are you stupid?"

As always, what he was doing was so depressing, it was dizzying.

And yet, the one hard rule in this school is to mysteriously have feelings for this one carefree guy.

Even now, Kazusa didn't understand the contradiction of such opposing personalities. It was like friends who had nothing in common whatsoever.

"That's cruel. Everyone in class got this form done."

"Who said that...?"

Because she didn't understand it, she hesitated in her hate for him.

Her anxiety wouldn't go away, because she thought she might have gotten the wrong idea.

"Besides, the school is affiliated with a university, so you can write down *"Enrolling in Houjou University"*. They would care more if you left it empty."

"I'm definitely not going."

Retorting, she didn't look up at him immediately, only giving him a peek.

"So you don't want to lie? ... you're more sincere than I thought."

"... don't come up with some conclusion of yours. It's depressing."

— *If I look at him carefully, he really is average. Just average.*

It's not like he's a sore sight, but he isn't anything charming either.

... there isn't a single guy around here that has even 1% of that.

"If you don't like that, then going with the flow will work better for you."

"What's that mean?"

— *But, perhaps he's just a little above average.*

Maybe by about two or three steps.

"Look, going with the idea of, "A delinquent that feeds a cat" isn't going to get you much recognition, but going with the flow would, right?"

"I'm not trying to be recognized by anyone."

— *Not like I'm charmed by him or anything, it's just not annoying to watch him so close by.*

If this goes on, I'm sure...

"I don't recommend filling out the form during class. If you can, try to get it done before the first bell..."

"You know..."

— *Okay, look, to begin with, it might be a really bad idea to study him in the first place.*

A guy in my year... well, doesn't matter what year they're from, I don't have any kind of interest.

Even if he were my father or something.

To find any value in other people who don't have any interest in me...

But, if that's the case then what should I do?

Should I judge the good and bad in him?

And what kind of effect would that have on me...?

"Well, all your choices are down below, so you can ponder on it a little longer, okay?"

"...!"

Coming back to her senses, Kazusa started moving her pencil across the page.

"Ah... good, good!"

What she was thinking and doing caused an eerie chill down her spine.

Because what she was doing was rather typical of a girl, staring at the guy in front of him, and thinking of nothing else.

"..... Kitahara,"

"Something on the form you're not sure of?"

"I'll listen to what it is you're saying, but at least listen to one thing from me."

"Ahh, of course! If there's anything bothering you, I'm sure I can help..."

"From now on, don't worry if I'm ignoring you or anything. You'll just feel really depressed after."

"I..... I see."

— *This is so stupid. For me to have an interest in someone else,*

is so very, very stupid.

"Look, I'm done. Take it."

"Woah, don't throw it! Just flip it over..."

— *It's nothing about him getting along with others.*

There's no meaning in the fascination with him.

It's about how the world he lives in doesn't affect him one bit.

"I don't really care if you look at it. I just wrote, *"Enrolling in Houjou University"*, like you said."

"... you're going to?"

"Who knows?"

"... I see."

— — *This'll get worse if I don't end it here.*

Besides, he's far too friendly for his own good.

There's no telling how far he'll go if I'm just even a little kind to him.

"You done with this? I'm going to sleep now."

"Ah, sorry. One last thing."

"... what?"

"I get it... from now on, I won't mind if you ignore me or anything."

"Ah... okay."

It should have ended.

The moment his words ended, Kazusa was left with a slightly uncomfortable expression...

"So, please don't mind me if I keep rambling on."

"... huh?"

It should have ended.

The moment his words continued, Kazusa was left with an even more uncomfortable expression.

"Good morning, Touma. Today's great weather, isn't it?"

"Just wait a second, Kitahara. That's not what I meant..."

"I'll listen to whatever it is you say, so at least listen to one thing from me."

"That isn't even one thing! You sure have a lot of balls!"

"Touma... what are you saying now?"

Kazusa cursed herself.

She cursed her foolishness for being even a little kind to such a depressing, overly friendly guy.

And over the course of a month, Kazusa slowly came to know some things.

That there was a division of two groups of people; those who avoided Kitahara Haruki, and those who relied on him.

For someone like Kazusa who only switched to the regular curriculum this year, it was quite difficult to get a grasp of this. However, it was the conclusion she arrived at after investigating just the school registry.

It had nothing to do with gender, grades, or personality. It had to do with the composition of the classes in first and second year.

In other words, there was a difference in attitude between those who were in a class with him for at least a year in either first or second years, and those who weren't.

Those in the latter group were quite distant with him, thought his meddling was rather annoying, and were quite negative with his lecturing. Even so, they became more and more annoyed with him.

And the former group just gave up from the start, and completely believed in him.

Proof of this might have come from trouble that happened between Kitahara and a guy sitting in front of her, named "*Hayasaka*".

The class had recommended Hayasaka as part of the athletic festival action committee, but he skipped out on important meetings and neglected preparations. With only a week before the festival, it was turning out that the class hadn't had any members selected or ready for any of the games.

And within that chaos, Kitahara took matters into his own hands perfectly, without any fuss or panic.

Well, the stuff he did here was far greater than what happened with Kazusa over the past month...

Kitahara took over all of Hayasaka's meetings, organized all the programmes, had the members for each of the games selected, and had roll calls run within the class.

Although he had done this all rather diligently, he broke his silence after homeroom with Hayasaka and lectured him.

In spite of the situation Hayasaka put himself in, he was rather hostile to Kitahara, and the situation became intense.

However, Kitahara didn't falter, and tried his best to get Hayasaka to recognize his failings at the athletic festival.

Hayasaka still became more hostile, but he wasn't able to raise even a finger...

And then the situation turned in Kitahara's favor... former classmates of his "*that had experienced this*" came in.

They already knew from the beginning when they first stuck with Kitahara.

And they just "*knew*" who he was.

That's why there wasn't any chaos at that incident, instead asking Hayasaka to be tolerant... or rather, they gave him some suggestions which ended the whole thing.

Stuff like *"Just getting angry is useless"*, *"You'll lose hairs if you take everything he says seriously"*, or *"He got the short end of the stick, so just accept it"*, though some of the suggestions didn't really stick together all too well.

And then afterwards, a week later when the athletic festival began...

On that day, Kazusa learned another thing.

Skipping all of the events, she killed time in the second music room, watching from the window into the evening view of the campus...

Third year students were carrying drinks onto the grounds after the festival had ended.

And within that group were the students from class E all having a blast.

And right in the middle of that was Hayasaka drinking from a wine cup (probably tea) alongside the figure of Kitahara drinking (probably tea).

Kitahara's attitude hadn't changed even now, although it seems like something else happened or Kitahara had lectured him. Either way, within the past week it seems that Hayasaka finally understood something, taking it all in stride and laughing it off.

"You should know him for at least half a year."

Kazusa didn't want to remember the words that useless guy spoke.

The class atmosphere had completely *"changed"* the following week.

The tense mood that used to be there had completely disappeared. Instead, everyone was cheerful, relying on Kitahara. And no matter what kind of trivial matter that showed up, he'd lecture them, and they'd smile back.

If that was all it was, then perhaps you could say he's degraded into the class' utility guy. But the atmosphere was much brighter, and all the cynicism and bad mouthing ceased. No one teased him or rejected him either; it was all just swept out.

This was especially true for Hayasaka. At some point he started calling him "*Haruki*", and Kitahara started calling him "*Chikashi*". Everyone approved of Kitahara Haruki as a "*person needed by the class*".

Well, no one really noticed this sort of optimistic feeling of "approval", it's just that everyone figured how to deal with the class representative who had been annoying for some time.

Kazusa was the only one who noticed this change in atmosphere.

Because she was the one people needed the least.

Because she was the only outsider that observed the athletic festival and that incident.

And..... because she was the one girl who watched Kitahara Haruki the most.

Because for the time being, Kazusa didn't take her eyes off him.

During classes or recess, she'd take advantage of the class atmosphere and sleep on her desk, stealing a peek at him, picking up the whispers around him.

... what would her mother think if she found out her piano-playing daughter was using her amazing hearing skills for something like this?

At any rate, Kazusa came up with a list of things about Kitahara, which cut into her precious sleeping time...

- Kitahara Haruki gives everyone a very bad first impression.
- Everyone avoids getting on his bad side.
- Anyone who likes him in the first place are really eager idiots.
- There's been no oddball that's shown up who's like that, and no such person will ever appear.
- Even so, he'll completely turn around this first impression in the span of several days, and gain everyone's support.
- He acts in such a particular, cowardly way like the devil would to achieve this.
- He'll start some sort of incident within his own group of people.
- And then he'll resolve it somehow, reversing the fortunes of those involved.
- This is what they call getting recognition from the idea of, "*A delinquent that feeds a cat*".
- And the people who fall within this incident have their souls uplifted, and can't make any kind of clear judgment.
- Then he'll gain more supporters, and one day rule them all.

Kazusa had no intention of announcing the fruits of such a horrifying study, and she didn't feel like saving the others around him either. Besides, she only studied him because she was just killing time.

It may be a rather horrifying reality, but as long as she didn't fall victim to him, it wasn't her problem at all.

She planned on just continuing to sleep in school, and as long as she kept herself hidden, she wouldn't end up like the others, and those around him wouldn't go after her.

She was rather optimistic at this point...

"Good morning, Touma! Also, happy birthday!"

"?!"

"It's today, right? May 21?"

"....."

"Happy birthday! Well, I'm in April, so as an older guy I can't really say much."

".....!"

She decided to run away in haste, since being called like that on such a day would make her desperately want to scream in anger with something like, "*W-Where the hell did you figure that out, you damn stalker?!*"

A few days afterward, Kitahara would also greet people on their birthdays. They took the same attitude that Kazusa figured they would, and she was glad from the bottom of her heart that she didn't suddenly speak in such a weird, overly self-conscious manner.

So relieved she'd almost send the classroom garbage can flying with a kick.

Standing out like that though, she couldn't ignore him no matter how much he spoke to her. Kazusa couldn't go on like she always did.

Soon though, the brainwashed may begin staring at her with half-hearted looks.

On the contrary though, they actually started whispering disgusting things like, "*Let Kitahara-kun take care of Touma-san*".

The girl who once scorned him as "*Mr. Class Representative*" spoke those words. And the moment the aloof Kazusa heard them, she felt the despair of being left behind, and couldn't sleep at night.

Just like that, the number of students talking to her decreased...

Just like that, the one particularly annoying student continued to talk to her even more.

Kitahara was backed by his believers, and feeling it was his obligation, he'd talk to Kazusa, bother her, worry about her, warn her, and cover her from many things like teachers or the school.

Kazusa started building up so much stress from his pride and appearance ripped her apart, almost making her scream, "*Don't you care about me at all?!*" She was cornered, almost as if she'd make this fatal outburst even one or two times.

— *I'm at my limit.*

I should at least talk with that idiot.

So that he won't bother me again. So that he won't talk to me again.

So that he won't bewilder me again.

If he still won't accept that, I'll have to resolve this through force.

Because, I'm at my limit.

Because I feel like everything in my mind's just gonna go right at him...

"Come on, Touma! How much burden are you going to place on Kitahara before you're satisfied?!"

"..... eh?"

But, there was something that she never expected, something where somebody from the Kitahara circle would butt in.

"Umm, Suwa-sensei... I thank you for your concern, but as her homeroom teacher, I'll take care of this."

It was on a day at the closing ceremony beginning of summer. The final exams for the first term finished, and the students were all relieved.

Kazusa was called to the staff room dumbfounded, being named by someone she didn't expect at all.

"This is the result for treating her like this all the time! Touma's no longer a music or scholar student! She's a regular maggot now!"

"I-I see..."

"....."

Of course, she had an idea why she was called in the first place.

She failed in all her subjects in the final exams, and there was one person in her year who heard about it.

"Besides, wouldn't it be helpful to keep an eye on her?"

"... I don't care. No one asked for that sort of thing."

And of course, she knew the reason why it ended up like that.

She never paid attention to the preparation or review lessons. She'd be already sleeping classes, or pretending to be while looking outside the window near her, and like that she wouldn't be able to get any more than 30% on her exams.

"I'm hearing you apologized to Kitahara for being the only one late with that career counseling form from a while back. And you even lied saying that you got the deadline wrong?"

"I'm telling you, it was nothing like that... the class representative just says that

sort of thing."

"Shifting the blame away to Kitahara? Considering he covers for everyone, you sure have balls."

"....."

But in that kind of way, it wasn't suspicious for Kazusa to blame having been distracted from her studies because of her observing Kitahara.

"And what kind of joke is this all wanting to go to Houjou University? You think anyone will recommend you over this sort of thing?"

"That was... because the class representative said it was fine."

"See, you're shifting the blame again!"

"....."

This Suwa guy was the guidance head, who last year became Kazusa's natural enemy...

"It's a bother for the rest of us when you're being the same as you were in the music curriculum! How long are you gonna carry that glory of yours from first year?!"

Ever since the music students pretty much abandoned her, she's always been fighting with this Suwa person.

The teachers who had never said anything about her until now happened to draw a particular line. No matter how direct they were with their words, they would take an imposing attitude and once again move back to the main point.

Though whether this was to support Kazusa or have her reflect on these words was again another story...

Kazusa's resentment for the horrible middle-aged teacher only grew with his jabs, his overbearing attitude, and his faultfinding point of view.

"And besides, you enrolled in this school because of your piano skills. You should never have given up and switched curriculum!"

"It doesn't matter if I go to university, does it? If you're not really interested in our money, then..."

"! Is that the attitude of a student?!"

— *Is that the attitude of a priest?!*

"S-Suwa-sensei... let's just leave it at this for today. Touma also seems like she'll reflect on this."

"Is this the attitude of someone who'll reflect on this?!"

— *Who's reflecting on what?*

It's not like it was a good idea to tell him off. I also hated having to push Suwa's buttons like that.

"You don't have to tell me...!"

Ramming the door of the staff room open, Kazusa couldn't withhold her anger, and stormed out into the hallway.

She did have an elegance with her tall stature and slender legs that underclassmen would appreciate when she took such wide steps, but given her expression right now, there'd be no one who would feel that way.

"Besides, I haven't heard of a single student who would use the music room on their own."

— *It's not like you asked me. You just happened to show me the place.*

"What would your mother say if she saw you like this...?"

— *It has nothing to do with her.*

"If it were me, I'd have to apologize to the teachers or my parents."

— — *I'm different from someone like you.*

"Maybe I'd do my best to keep up with studies like the others, or..."

— — *Yeah, you don't have to tell me.*

I don't want to be here anymore...

"Ah, ow, ow! Touma!" "...!"

I had just gotten things to an atmosphere I really wanted, and yet this guy who doesn't look at people's faces, doesn't know when to keep quiet, and doesn't think about anything at all just waltzes in here.

Today was the closing ceremony, so I'm sure the students should have headed home...

"What'd they say? It looks like it took quite a long time..."

"....."

It didn't matter what they said, it was all harsh.

Even though the homeroom teacher had taken over matters, in the end he followed Suwa's advice and said things like, *"Don't cause Kitahara any more trouble"*.

"Speaking of which Touma, did you really use any of my notes? I'm sure at least 80% of it should have been right."

"....."

Everyone in the staff room was an ally of the class representative in front of me.

Because he's the *"pride of the regular students"*, just like when she used to be a *"music honors student"*.

"You're going to take the supplementary exams, right?"

"....."

In the end, Kazusa couldn't be normal at all when coming to this curriculum.

From a special honors student to a particularly terrible student.

The teachers, the classmates, the class representative...

There wasn't a single person that ignored her.

"Look, you can recover from the first term. Just take your time during the summer break. If you need me, I can..."

"...!"

"Eh...?"

That's why Kazusa did what she always did.

She would bare her fangs at anyone.

"....."

When she shot such a cold look at him, his expression soon changed, and she looked ahead of him, like there was no one.

"A-Ah... Tou, ma?"

Kitahara stood there, only able to see her walk off.

It seemed like this was the first time he had figured when to keep quiet for such an annoying guy.

That's why Kazusa believed this would be the end.

That probably he wouldn't talk to her anymore.

If one were violent with anyone who believed they were trying to help, then certainly they'd be like that...

"... you idiot..."

Even Kazusa didn't know whether the words she mumbled were pointed at him, or herself.

That day in the second music room, she started going on a rather harsh recital.

The loud echoes of the piano would reach beyond the open window and bounce off every crook and nanny. Those in club activities would stop many times, looking up at the window.

Even with the end of the closing ceremonies and entering the summer break, Kazusa was still the *"Second Music Room Owner"*.

Though the guitar had failed to break through the piano's echoes, it was playing *"Smoke on the Water"*.

Just like Suwa said, the second music room was a symbol of Kazusa's anger.

Just by playing the piano here, the revolt she had for people, the trouble people caused her, and the damage they inflicted on her would be here.

Even so, Kazusa couldn't leave any longer.

Because this was the only place in the school where she could be.

".....!"

Her fingers couldn't keep up with the speed of her feelings.

She didn't pay attention to the strength at which she played the piano, as if her fingers were numb.

It's not that she got worse. It's just that today, she was putting in too much effort.

The guitar began playing "*Back in Black*".

The summer holidays begin tomorrow.

On such a particular milestone, Kazusa's wish of "*I want to be alone*" was finally granted.

Because she was able to rid herself of that one particularly dreary, talkative class representative.

She'd decided on not seeing him for even a month, and he wouldn't be able to mend their relationship at all. The two would remain distant.

Probably she'd be able to make it to graduation without anyone bothering her.

That's why she completely forgot all about today, only thinking about tomorrow.

Only thinking of the summer holidays she has all to herself.

— — *Maybe I should go on a trip.*

Go to some small place where no one would know me or call for me.

Take a day at some hotel, and just be totally alone.

Those kind of days that would never change...

And then she stopped playing the piano for some reason.

Thinking of the fun summer holidays had stopped her fingers.

... for some reason, the thought of being alone was particularly painful, even though she had finally gotten a chance.

The guitar began playing "*WHITE ALBUM*" as always...

"..... off-key..."

The words she mumbled were indeed criticism coming from her mouth, but her eyes seemed to smile so much as to fumble her words.

It was the sound of the guitar player who didn't improve much at all over the course of the term that she kept hearing.

It was selfish practice that had no kind of harmony, and while it continued to miss notes, it'd always cut into her performance. It wouldn't stop if she did, and would just interrupt if she continued.

Even though it was quite a bother, there wasn't a time that she had merely let it continue to play here at all.

However...

"Just a little longer..."

Today's "*WHITE ALBUM*" was rather perfect.

Her fingers began to feel a little less numb.

She even felt like possibly playing another song.

Because at that moment, the guitar was the only thing she had.

Touma Kazusa hated the skies.

She absolutely hated the blue skies where thick clouds would rise and spread from the end of the rain season.

She hated the teachers, the students, and pretty much the world around her.

And she hated the overly familiar student so much. For the time being, she wouldn't see him for a while.

However... at the moment, this quiet noise was the only thing Touma Kazusa didn't hate.

Chapter 2: "Summer"

It was about two thirds into August when the top 8 baseball teams all assembled...

Kazusa spent away her particularly terrible summer holidays.

Even her plan of spending time alone ended up being "*bothersome*" after a mere several seconds. She'd be lying down in the spacious Touma household, running her not-so-great air conditioner at full blast, and sleep whenever she felt like doing so.

She didn't think of anything else, other than this crazy idea that the economical class representative would complain if he saw this lifestyle as well as the monthly electricity bill.

Up until two years ago, it didn't matter if it were a summer holiday or a regular day. Ten hours a day, she'd practice the piano every day without rest. Now though, she only practices twice a week, spending only at most three or four hours. It could be compared to her killing time 24 hours a day nowadays.

Still though, she did quite a bit of other things in July.

Kazusa figured she didn't have anything to do during this summer holiday, so she decided to go get a driver's license, and began driving school.

Even though plans at first began well, it was necessary for her to commute for at least a month. In reality, she should be busy receiving instruction on the streets... however, Touma Kazusa was a person whose personality did not match the word "*school*" at all.

For someone who had particularly good senses by nature, it was a trivial matter for her to clear driving school. Every time she went through practice,

she'd clear it in one shot, and with a lot of time left over, she got out of the car quickly.

This selfishness of such a violent student was attributed to the female instructor's charm... or rather the fact she was faint of heart, and thus she let this slide.

Before long, on a particular day when she entered the third course, the female instructor caught a cold for several days, throwing Kazusa's summer holidays out of whack.

The substitute male instructor had her practice repetitively, even though she would clear the courses quickly, and he didn't let her get off if there was time leftover.

In itself, both of the instructors were following rules, and although the students had no reason to complain, just about everything that followed got on Kazusa's nerves.

That attitude of his kept finding problems in her driving when there shouldn't have been any. That voice of his kept arguing every single thing in such a horrible way. And what Kazusa couldn't deal with the most, was the way he did things by touching her shoulders, her hips, her hands...

All of those elements made her remember the school year head. The third time they practiced, Kazusa got out of the car with about ten minutes to spare.

Now it's not entirely certain whether the instructor was left in the passenger seat in agony reaching for something... leaving that aside, it was quite obvious that Kazusa never completed the course, and never returned to that school ever again.

Even then, she did manage to legitimately get a driver's license.

... the following week, she cleared the test through self-instruction and practice.

In terms of her skill, it was what would happen if she had gotten 90% in her courses and that lecturing class representative had found out and said something about it. Kazusa was rather gratified having imagined such a scene.

But she knew.

That if you can do it if you put your mind to it.

Save for the fact her mother abandoned her with the piano.

"Well... time to get going."

Seeing that the clock on the wall said three o'clock, she got off the wide floor of her living room and started taking off her pajamas.

She'd roll up her long black hair that extended to her hips, and the moment the pajamas came off from her head, her hair would roll down her bare back.

Her breasts also flipped, not wearing any bra, and her slightly unbalanced, slender body came back together in an instant.

And then she walked nude into the corner of the room, picking up underwear from a folded set of clothes lying around in the living room and slipping them on.

Of course this wasn't something Kazusa prepared herself, but from an assistant that came twice a week to do the laundry.

This same assistant had also done the dry cleaning for the school uniform hanging on the wall, which Kazusa took and easily put on.

"... it's hot."

She narrowed her eyes at the dazzling sunlight coming from outside the window just as she finished putting on her clothes.

Certainly it was hot outside, and the weather forecast did say it was going to be over 35 degrees celsius.

The uniform she put on did indeed follow school regulations in this blazing heat. Kazusa planned to go to school, though not to attend in the middle of the summer holidays.

Even though to her it was quite some trouble, useless, and quite tiresome...

"What a bother."

And even though she grumbled as such, she was in the mood for something a little better than the isolation she had up until now.

After all, it was Tuesday today.

And there was something good, even if just a little better than usual.

The inner parts of the school weren't silent, but not noisy either. It was that kind of halfway point.

On the campus grounds, those involved in athletic club activities would soon groan over the sinking sensation of the heat. You could hear the enthusiasm from those inside as they were about to head out.

As Kazusa had nothing to do with the sports club, she'd immediately take refuge within the school building and proceeded up the familiar steps to the third floor.

Doing so, she went down the corridor with special classrooms lined up along the west wall, heading for the room furthest down... the second music room.

Even though it had been soundproofed, it was useless with the window open. She could hear the guitar, bass, and drums playing from the first music room so loudly it hurt her ears.

But Kazusa had no intent of responding in kind, and once she confirmed she was alone, she would open the doors to the second music room and slip in.

This chain of actions she took didn't stop, as she would lock the doors, close up the curtains and turn on the lights.

In this way, the identity of the *"Second Music Room Owner"* had remained concealed so far.

Of course closing up the classroom did leave it much more humid than before, opening up the pores on Kazusa's body and attacking her within several seconds.

Without thinking about the electricity bill, she'd take the remote for the air conditioner and turn the fan on at the highest setting, with the temperature at the lowest setting.

And then, she would finally take her seat at the piano like she had planned.

As if she were about to perform at a competition, she'd sit deeply in a manner that would project her bottom and straightened her back.

But, she didn't immediately start playing.

She'd lay her fingers on top of the piano, look straight ahead and listen carefully to the classroom next door.

Kazusa wasn't particularly trying to concentrate, nor was she waiting for the sweat to cool off.

What she was waiting for was something else.

She was waiting for the band practice to end at 5 PM.

The feeling of the drum beat so hard it blocked out anything else.

The sound of the simple yet steady bass.

The sensation of the somewhat stuck-up guitar.

The experience of the shallow keyboard.

And though she isn't here today, we have of course, the frequently absent female vocalist.

It was probably the light music club, a band of volunteers that formed up.

Certainly they were practicing during the summer, so that they could be on stage at the culture festival this fall in the School of Houjou University.

Having said that, Kazusa didn't play not because she didn't want to bother them, and certainly not because so that they would improve their skill.

Because to her, listening to this level of play was rather useless to Kazusa.

The reason why she didn't play...

Even though she has an amazing piano at home, the reason why she went through this heat and came on a train to this place...

In other words, she came to waste even more time.

As expected, the performance nearby had ceased once the clock in the classroom read 5 PM.

"Now, then."

As if to be the echo of that practice, Kazusa quietly began playing the piano.

Her run at first began small, and slow.

To both the athletic club members outside and those in the room next door, they thought it had been playing for some time, or that perhaps it was to block out the sound of the band.

It was so casual, it caused that kind of misunderstanding.

Kazusa knew.

She knew about their practice times on Tuesday and Thursday.

The light music club, a band made up of volunteers.

Their skills were rather average, but they'd assemble and practice for two hours from 3 PM to 5 PM, and after cleaning up they'd be done at 5:30 PM.

And then, afterward...

"..... off-key..."

The guitar began playing "*Stairway to Heaven*".

Yes, Kazusa knew.

Or rather, she had calculated as such.

On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons...

After they had finished their practice, that "*Mr. Guitar*" would begin.

Perhaps he was one of the members in the band.

But he didn't quite follow well when all the members were practicing.

Though the guitar in the band had blended in just a bit, it still stood out a bit. At the very least, it had a different character.

In other words, this "*Mr. Guitar*" was surely the second guitarist. Maybe he was filling in. Maybe he ran errands. Or maybe he was a utility guy.

And in order to keep up, he'd remain behind after the others left so that he could practice privately.

Steadily, seriously, modestly, and with all his effort...

That's why Kazusa had named him "*Mr. Guitar*", a favorable impression of hers behind his back... well, actually she didn't want to feel that way.

Because she had absolutely no interest in the kind of "*Working hard is a virtue*" attitude.

She believed everything would end up the same.

It had nothing to do with working hard to finally reach the top, or his abilities improving while she wasn't paying attention.

And although it didn't, and even though he worked hard, it's that the reward was so far away.

The guitar began playing "*Layla*".

TL Note: In the game, this was "Spirit Boat Procession"

That's why she felt this off-key sound had absolutely no value.

It's just that it was miraculously and delicately pleasant.

It felt good to feel her superiority compared to this.

She just didn't hate it...

"Ah well..."

Kazusa sighed as the guitar missed notes. It didn't drag down her piano practice, as the rhythm and sound of the guitar were outclassed.

She was only listening to the guitar.

Playing the piano on her own.

As the two resided in different classrooms, they had no kind of connection.

The guitar suddenly began playing "*WHITE ALBUM*" so as to show its true colors.

Kazusa had no interest in learning any more about this "*Mr. Guitar*".

Because as classmates who had no kind of connection, not having seen or known each other, the conversation would just be awkward.

Perhaps if they did meet, she wouldn't be able to hear this from next week onward.

Which was why up until now, she had closed up the second music room and put on the air conditioner at full blast. But with the window open, both the cooling and sound proofing weren't so great, and yet, she would just continue playing the piano, listening to this off-key guitar.

With the sound of an explosion echoing from the ground, a new star appeared within the starry sky, disappearing in an instant.

It was a special seat on the second floor balcony of the Touma household, where one could gaze upon such a feat this year... the market summer festival nearby had a display of fireworks.

"... are you angry?"

"What are you worried about now...?"

But right now, Kazusa looked up from the balcony at the lively sky as it finally contrasted with her strained voice.

In actuality, it was a rather deep, gloomy voice.

"I said I was sorry, right? The meetings are taking longer than I expected, so I couldn't make time to visit Japan."

"Ah, really."

And the cellphone that Kazusa held to her ear was rather apologetic, but it was neither heavy nor gloomy.

One would wonder if the voice from the cellphone noticed it was trapping Kazusa's voice in a vicious spiral.

"Are you listening?"

"I am, and I'm not angry. I'm not a kid anymore."

Touma Youko. Kazusa's biological mother, and her only blood relative.

She left her only daughter in Japan, and moved to Europe by herself. The whole reason Kazusa was like this.

"... even so, I never really believed what you said in the first place."

Kazusa knew not to hope in this.

She felt it wasn't so important to hope in.

"Ah, I'm also going to be sending you a souvenir. I think it'll get there tomorrow."

"Well, thank you."

"When I come back from my performance in China, I'll stop by Japan for a day. You want to go for lunch?"

Such a light promise coming from her parent, in actuality, remained that way and stood her up.

This makes three times this year she'd broken her promise.

... on the other hand, there wasn't a single promise she was able to make at all this year.

"Are you still going to school?"

"It's the summer holidays."

She hadn't seen her mother for a year and a half.

She's not even confident about what she looks like now.

"I see... then do you want to come to Paris for fun? I'm preparing for a tour so I can't join you, but I can have one of my staff assist you."

"..... no thanks. I'm really busy here. About the same as you."

But, maybe not meeting her was for the best.

... because if she did meet her, she had no idea what kind of words to say to her.

"I see, well then I'll be hanging up. Looks like we're finally starting to board the plane."

"See you."

"Ah, Kazusa! Also, you..."

"...!"

She threw down her cellphone at the floor of the balcony, with parts of it flying off. It happened at about the same time a succession of ten fireworks fired off.

But, she didn't care if it was broken.

Because the person she was talking to had stood her up on her promise just now, and probably won't be coming back to Japan for a while.

"Ha, haha..."

The fireworks in the wide sky brightened up the profile of her face, revealing a slightly cheerful expression which, in a lot of ways showed how estranged she was.

She didn't want to hope in this.

It wasn't so important to hope in.

"I really don't care..."

She shouldn't have had to put it so simply.

The world was still an existence meant to hurt Kazusa.

At the very least, Kazusa again began believing that was the case.

Even that off-key guitar two days a week was the same.

Even the fireworks that lit up the night sky now.

Perhaps God gave her this trial to worsen her despair... or maybe he was pulling a really bad prank.

"I really, really don't care..."

She thought it was stupid.

For just today, she really thought this slightly festive mood of hers was stupid.

Touma Kazusa hated the skies.

She absolutely hated the lonely, starry skies that remained soon after the fireworks.

Even that annoying class representative. Even Mr. Guitar's terrible playing.
Even her own learning ability.

She really, really, really hated it so much, she couldn't stop crying.

Two days later, on Thursday.

Kazusa would change into her clothes and leave her house like on Tuesday.

But at the moment, it was different. It was just before noon, when the sunlight poured down all its heat.

Just ten minutes while in the train, her eyes felt heavy, and many times she tried to struggle, and she almost missed the Minamisetsugu station.

Because two nights ago, after having that call with Youko, she never left the house, but she was never able to sleep.

Recently, a lot of negative emotions swirled around in her mind, and even when she closed her eyes, they would attack.

And when her eyes were open, nothing would happen, as she would be lost in this imaginary labyrinth in such a large room. She couldn't escape for even a day.

And then, whether it was because her soul was released from that prison, or because she was at her limit, but her drowsiness had attacked her violently last night.

Even so, this time Kazusa rejected that need for sleep out of her own volition.

"It's so hot..."

She noticed it since she left the house, but when she reached Minamisetsugu, it was rather prominent.

Because unlike two days ago, the heat was about to reach its peak.

Because having stayed wide awake for two days and isolated herself, her body was in no condition to deal with such temperatures.

And especially because today, the weather forecast said it would be its hottest this year today...

When she finally got there, it was already past twelve.

She'd usually go around to avoid the athletic club members on the campus grounds, but as it was lunch there wasn't anyone at the moment. She took the opportunity to go straight to the shoe lockers, though she was out of breath by then and had her hands on her knees.

Her body was so out of whack from being out in the blazing heat for even just five minutes; seemed like she was going to have a heat stroke.

She took some time to recover at the shoe rack, taking a drink from the water fountain. It would seem that the athletic club members had already damaged it, as the temperature that spread in her mouth seemed to be as lukewarm as regular tap water.

With an immediate frown on her face, she couldn't bear it and took the water in one gulp. She'd then take five or six sweets from her pocket and throw them in her mouth.

Doing so, she gained enough energy and water to survive about half the day. She finally started to head toward the third floor without dragging her legs.

Actually, only her brain realized that once she reached the school building, she was so exhausted that she could barely take any steps up.

"Ah..."

One step, and then another step, and then after taking a quick break she'd take another step. She'd ascend almost less than fifty steps up the stairs, and finally she got to the hallway of the third floor when...

Kazusa would hear notes so off-key, it almost blew off all her hardships up until now.

It was where she was headed in the first place anyway.

The furthest, west end of the hallway; a classroom on the east wall.

In other words, she heard the sound coming from the first music room; that terrible guitar.

"....."

Slowly enduring with the off-key sounds, Kazusa once again brought herself to bear and strolled down the hallway.

Of course, she wasn't headed towards the second music room.

All the sweat she had built up until now for some reason had disappeared.

Her flushed face had returned to normal.

Her breath had caught up.

Returning back to the usual *"Sharp-edged Touma Kazusa"*.

She knew.

The reason why today she left her house earlier than usual.

Because she believed he'd be here.

Because once practice ended, "*Mr. Guitar*" would be here practicing alone.

Because if it were him, he wouldn't be just practicing, but he'd be also preparing for lessons.

The reason was...

"Kitahara...?"

"Wha... huh?"

Because a familiar face appeared.

"What are you doing? Part of the go-home club in the summer holidays?"

"Can't you tell?"

Mr. Guitar... Kitahara Haruki was rather surprised the moment he saw Kazusa, but he immediately returned to glancing at his fingertips on the cords.

That attitude didn't seem like that of a person who had any ill feelings or was flustered over the parting that happened at the closing ceremony at all.

"I can tell your playing is rather terrible..."

Which was why Kazusa started with some rather provocative words, to try and find out how he felt.

"You also part of the go-home club, Touma? Why'd you come to school in the middle of summer?"

"You sure are a brat for snapping away at someone the instant they're dead tired..."

... though she was just a little hurt from each of his reactions.

"I only started this year. Can't be helped I'm terrible at this right now."

"Well... you're just holding down cords, right? I can't understand how you can

miss."

"That's what other people say when they haven't played it..."

"Hmm..."

"You know Touma... you should change your tendency to laugh at those who are giving it their all."

"Giving it their all, huh."

"I think it's great that people are even breaking a little bit of a sweat like this. Well, the same holds true whether you're using your body or your head."

"Hmm..."

What he said was rather bland to Kazusa.

Because she felt those who had results were far better than those who worked hard.

Because she wasn't so estranged from music so as to be someone who *"never played music"*.

Because she didn't allow for even *"just a little"* incompetence.

"So, what's up today? If you want me to give you supplementary lessons, wait a little bit and then I can..."

"Let me see that."

"Eh...?"

Because he *"started only this year"*.

"Let me see that guitar."

"Uh, well..."

Because she had listened to his guitar for so long already...

"Just for a little bit."

"Touma...?"



Reaching out her hand, indeed Kitahara was rather bewildered, but slowly gave up his guitar.

Kazusa took it with ease and grabbed a seat. Sitting deeply as she would with the piano, she began playing the guitar.

"Ah..."

Playing the exact same song that he was playing just a moment ago.

Like if it were a different song.

... just to show off.

"Ah, ah..."

Because this was her goal today.

Not supplementary lessons.

And especially not to play the piano.

She just wanted to see him.

She wanted to see Mr. Guitar; the class representative in front of her.

Kazusa lied to herself and others all this time.

She already knew from the start who "*Mr. Guitar*" was.

From the sound of the guitar, its clumsiness, seriousness, and flexibility led her to know it was him.

Because when first meeting him, and several days after she cut him down with such cold words...

When she heard his playing for the first time on that day in spring, and was amazed by how horrible it was...

Since the scuffle with the guitar in the first music room on that evening, she realized it was that annoying class representative.

"....."

"*Mr. Guitar*" gulped down hard.

"*Mr. Class Representative*" looked back and forth between her hands and her face.

At how the fingers pulled the strings so smoothly.

Kazusa was totally different from when she was in the classroom. She was so serious, and somehow, she was enjoying it.

It was an expression Kazusa would only show in particularly special days.

Like the day when she had decided to ignore the nagging of the class representative.

Like the day when she villified Kitahara's unnecessary words.

Like the day she returned a cold look at the overly familiar attitude of the classmate sitting next to her.

All those days were waiting in her heart, waiting for this terrible guitar player in this classroom.

Perhaps once he heard the sound of this guitar that granted wishes, it would enshroud her own piano playing. Or rather, she would allow it to happen, and both of them would begin exchanging sounds with one another.

That was the expression Kazusa gave.

An expression that unilaterally decided to make peace with someone and be at ease.

"Thank you."

"....."

Generally been finished with the guitar, when she went to hand it back, the original owner was completely frozen.

"... you're not taking it?"

"*sniff*..."

No, he did move just a little bit.

"Kitahara...? Are you crying...?"

"..... I'm sorry. Please don't make me feel so horrible."

His entire body winced.

"..... did it hurt?"

"It was more than just a wound... my own ability is in despair..."

"This isn't about ability, it's about practice. Like you said, practice until you sweat."

"Eh...?"

It was as if she was lecturing, as Kitahara's face lit up.

"Even if you spend a little bit of time, if you practice seriously, you can at least do this. You may be proud of it, but you're not trying hard enough."

"No way... even though I've been practicing two hours a day..."

Though those words came from her vast experience, this time Kazusa was just putting on a big show.

Besides, even though she had said "*a little bit of time*", it wasn't that persuasive at all given her own guitar playing.

"You'd normally be doing this for ten hours a day."

Certainly, she did do that.

"Well, that's if I become a professional."

"... you don't have to be."

... well, she did practice for ten hours last night.

"That was amazing though... are you also playing the guitar, Touma?"

"Nope. I've just been dabbling away at it for the past few days."

"Don't be going off denying everything you said just now..."

Somehow, after having played all the notes perfectly, the hand behind her back did a bit of a triumphant pose without revealing itself to him.

"Now, try again from the beginning. I can help you get into this for a little bit."

"... you sure?"

"I've got time to kill."

"Why'd you come to school during the summer holidays...?"

"Hurry up and play."

"Y-Yeah..."

As Kazusa insisted, Kitahara began pulling on the strings.

Taking a deep breath, he looked carefully at his hands, and began again with a bad rhythm and tempo.

Indeed, based on the off-key sound, it didn't look like he had quite gotten a grasp of it.

"You can start slowly."

On the other hand, he didn't go very far so he stopped.

"You say I should hurry and play, and then you say I should play slowly..."

"There's a difference in the nuances between both of those. You're a class representative with excellent grades, so I'm sure you'd get the idea, right?"

"... of course."

"Then, start slowly."

"Tch..."

This time, although he started off slower than usual, he did get the notes right.

"....."

Even so, his six months of practice was still about three levels lower compared to Kazusa's overnight dabbling.

"....."

But, in a way that couldn't be helped.

Because Kazusa had devoted practicing at least ten hours, having been loved by the gods of music since she was born.

That too, was motivation created from the day she became attached to the piano.

"Speaking of which..."

"Now what is it?"

Just that, it was to get a conversation going with the class representative in front of her.

"This is the first time you've spoken to me on your own, isn't it?"

"..... you're just imagining things."

She wanted to be attached to someone that much.

Of course, it's not that it had to be anyone.

It's just that there's only one person who could fit this profile.

It wasn't a matter of elimination, let alone choice...

"Thank you."

"You're off-key."

She had to recognize it.

She had to recognize that right now, she absolutely needed the meddling class representative in front of her, who wouldn't leave her alone.

Actually, Kazusa couldn't sleep at all that night.

Her body was so tired she couldn't move an inch, so she took a taxi from the school all the way home and just fell in bed like that. Even so, her head rejected the drowsiness that assailed her.

She had too much to think about, and just trying to get her thoughts in order at that level kept her from sleeping.

— — *This isn't good.*

Having said that, 90% of the pending questions in her head were about the school festival three months from now.

In the end, she only got to teach Kitahara the guitar for about an hour.

Even though he was eager to learn during the day, she felt rather uncomfortable, cutting off his questions and immediately headed home.

Anyway, although he had completely forgotten, she remembered.

She remembered that if the lessons continued, other band members would come to practice, and she would bear witness to such a bizarre scene.

—*He's the kind of idiot that would bring that about, anyway.*

Turning in her bed tens of times, Kazusa gave a sigh as she pondered deeply over first learning of this cruel reality.

That in this world, there are people who can't really do things like they would like to...

Kitahara... she got an idea of Mr. Guitar's performance ability.

In other words, his thoughts were not fast enough to allow his fingers to react.

With all the qualities of an honor student, his words, thoughts, grades, and deliberation didn't allow for any kind of conditioned reflexes.

In other words, he's got a good head, but his sense is dull.

At first (at least in Kazusa's eyes), looking down upon the class representative that always aimed high was gratifying. She did teach him while like that, but finally she had an irritating feeling that kept boiling up inside of her.

—*Why won't it go well?*

He's trying so hard.

He's not the type to lose to anyone if he studies and works hard...

Yet, why won't God reward him?

Kazusa realized that she didn't understand anything.

She didn't understand the difference in ability between herself and Kitahara, having grown up for the past ten or so years.

While he would spend ten hours a day doing work on a desk, she would spend ten hours a day playing the piano.

He spent his years studying, while she spent her years being attached to music instruments.

That was why he couldn't chase after Kazusa. That was why Kazusa couldn't support him.

Certainly, there's a connection between effort and the result.

Even the words she said, "*not trying hard enough*", might actually have some meaning.

However, her ability to play a guitar overnight was supplemented by the fact she practiced for over ten years on a piano, ten hours a day.

He didn't have such a musical background to support him playing a guitar for the past six months.

She didn't have any form of logical thoughts thanks to having cleared out pretty much all her senses up until now, only realizing this folly just recently.

Having said that, this wasn't about changing the past years at all.

This was about changing the course of the next three months.

— — *Then, what should I do?*

What should I do so that he can play well...?

That's why Kazusa thought.

She strained her brain as if she had never done so in the past tens of years.

Though it'd be something that Kitahara would probably think of after a meal. He probably would have a solution only seconds after thinking of it.

Even so, Kazusa really gave it some thought.

She thought about how to change that off-key, no-good guitar playing of his.

She thought about how if he went up on stage and made some sort of error, how to make sure the audience wouldn't laugh at him.

She pondered, worried, and writhed...

Soon, her thoughts about her piano, her mother, and even herself...

She forgot about it all, and thought only of him.

It was the last third of August.

The high school baseball league was over, along with the O-Bon festivities and going to the beach...

Kazusa was so busy, her eyes were rolling around.

That day... the weeks following that Thursday onward, Kazusa's summer holidays had all disappeared.

For the past several days, it seemed as if she was heading to the school carrying heavy musical instruments every day. Of course, she wasn't around for supplementary lessons, club activities, or to participate. The athletic club members were gossiping all day bout a female student shutting herself in the second music room.

At the end of last week, a delivery truck appeared on the campus grounds out of the blue, carrying a large amount of equipment in and causing general grief.

After a bit of a scuffle, the second music room became much more lively thanks to it all, considering it was rather tasteless being adorned with nothing more than the piano.

Other instruments like the bass, saxophone, and drum set were brought in, pretty much rivaling the first music room.

And even to any observers, they probably realized that as school equipment this would all have been very expensive.

Of course, all of it was equipment coming from the Touma household studio storage, which wasn't something any average person would even be able to comprehend.

And today, the last Tuesday of the month, in the afternoon...

Kazusa sat rather deeply on her stool in the completely changed second music room.

She placed her fingers on the piano, staring ahead and not moving an inch.

She meditated, but she waited, relaxing.

Because soon, the lesson would begin...

A guitar solo soon filled the silence in the hallways and through the open window.

"So just *"WHITE ALBUM"* then, huh...?"

TL Note: In the game, this was "El Cóndor Pasa"

Unlike what the band had been practicing, it was if this song he was inclined to play made her a little dizzy, and she backed away from the anticipation that had been building up until now.

Her eyes drop down to the piano keys, and took a deep breath as she lifted her arm...

The piano from the second music room began accompanying the guitar.

Of course, it too played "*WHITE ALBUM*".

It wasn't just to join in the guitar like before, but it made itself clear.

It couldn't leave the other performance like this.

And, the guitar solo stopped.

The piano's accompaniment also stopped in a heartbeat.

Certainly during this time, someone in the east classroom next door must be looking out the window trying to look into her classroom with a dubious expression.

But as the window was covered with a heavy curtain, he wouldn't be able to see, simply returning to his guitar with a puzzled look...

He began playing "*WHITE ALBUM*" once again.

The accompaniment began again a step afterward.

The piano led the guitar, as if to be just like the nosy class representative.

This time, the guitar didn't stop.

Only letting his hands move, the guitar played but the tempo and musical intervals were varied, with a quality that couldn't really face the original composer.

That's why the piano... Kazusa, lectured him using sounds.

To bring about the true beauty of the song the composer originally intended, to point out the mistakes in the guitar.

She drove these points in one by one, without saying a word.

With nothing but a perfect tempo and perfect intervals.

If he moved too quickly she'd pull him back, and if he was slow she'd wait.

If he went too high she'd bring him down, and if he went too far down she'd bring him back up. And if he was totally off-key, she'd guide him to the right notes.

And like that, she'd bear with playing so strongly until he managed to catch up.

"Your guitar is so off-key, Kitahara..."

Of all the people that would know an ordinary girl could be so unbelievably devoted, it was none other than Kazusa herself.

After all, in her sound, half of it was a prank, and the other half felt great.

It felt so worth it to be able to look down upon the sound of the guitar with the sound of the piano like this.

As she taught his guitar technique, she felt there was a limit to the words she could say.

If it were her, she would have no idea how to convey to him how to play well.

That's why she could only say, *"You can only just play"*.

Which was why Kazusa used sounds instead.

Because by doing this, she'd be able to correct his playing without using words.

This was the teaching technique she finally landed upon after having these unaccustomed thoughts of hers.

At first, she'd have him get used to her expert piano play, and then gradually move on to accompany him with other parts of the band composition.

With the guitar, the drum, the saxophone...

So that Kitahara Haruki would become a guitarist that could stand on stage triumphant in three months.

... it was all just for that.

The summer holidays ended, and as the days suddenly got very busy, Kazusa would only sigh, saying "*Oh dear*", with a smile on her face.

Chapter 3: "Fall"

"Yo, morning, Tou..."

"Hey, class rep! Kitahara!"

"Ah, yes~?"

"Come to the staff room as soon as you can, we have something to distribute. We're actually going to need them back the day after tomorrow..."

"... when did you hear about that?"

"... well, never mind the details. Anyways, I'm counting on you."

"Well, I'll try and figure something out."

"Sorry for bothering you. Anyways, I'll be waiting. It's quite heavy."

——.....

Two weeks after the end of the summer break.

It's the middle of September, around the time the students and teachers pulled out of their holiday mode.

"Ah, Kitahara-kun, do you happen to have time during lunch?"

"What? Something wrong?"

"Yes, something serious... see, today's the mandatory meeting for the library members, right?"

"Ahh, speaking of which... huh? What happened to Harada-san...?"

"That's right... Hiromi's been out thanks to a cold, so we need someone to stand in..."

"Ah..."

"We really need help on this one."

"Technically speaking, it has nothing to do with me, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"... even so, what's with that smile?"

"Hiromi has something really important to discuss today. Something about

someone that would definitely come..."

"....."

"....."

"... in the library right now?"

"As expected of the class rep! Knew we could count on you in an instant!"

"I really couldn't care about that. Anyways, try to come up with something for the teacher if I'm late by about five minutes."

"Leave it to me! Roll call or whatever, I'll do it!"

"Please. Anything but that voice, please..."

——.....!

Kitahara Haruki of class 3-E kept taking care of other things like always.

Like before as always, the representative's job is to continue and take care of tasks for the teachers for all of this year. Taking care of minor problems with the students was also part of it. And...

"Yo, Haruki. Let's get going today too~"

"Chikashi..."

"We've got the homepage up, so we need to go around and ask for comments today..."

"Uh, well, can't the other committee members help with that?"

"Don't bother! They don't have the skills nor diligence. All of them just keep going, *"Haruki would probably be fine with it"*, see?"

"... uh, I'm not a member of the executive committee this year."

And when the term started, he also ended up helping the executive committee with the school festival. He'd fallen into a trap where he no longer had any rest time even after school.

"Ignoring the upperclassmen, I really hated the past me from last year and the year ago."

"Well, it's the seniors' fault, don't you think? But you know, this year's..."

"Band practice? But you're not gonna even go up on stage, man. You don't really have to stick with them every time, you know."

"Maybe not but... maybe I might have to."

"Like Takeya would suddenly fall sick or something. I'd rather be stabbed by a girl."

"... do you really think he isn't going to catch something?"

"Come on, let's go, let's go! I can't get going without you around!"

"Ah, wait, let go! All right, all right already, so just wait a minute!"

——~!!

"Later, Touma!"

"....."

"..... be careful on your way home, okay?"

"....."

"Come on, let's go, Haruki!"

"Y-Yeah..."

Kazusa would gaze out the window beside her, then look, as if in interest, at the chatter Kitahara got himself in. He *"wasn't really a member but a main staff of"* the school festival executive committee, and Hayasaka had already pulled him out of the classroom after having asked him to help.

And several seconds later, it took a certain someone too much time to control their breathing...

".....~~~!!"

Luckily, the sudden rumble of the desks by the window all falling over one by one didn't reach Kitahara as he walked down the hallway.

That day in the second music room, she began a violent recital with *"a particular meaning"*. It'd been a while since she'd done this.

It was so loud it blocked out the sound of the wind instruments in classrooms down the hall. The members playing said instruments felt it was "*musical satire*", losing their motivation.

But today, the large echoes of the piano wasn't mixed with any kind of guitar solo.

Because Kazusa's performance was particularly fired up.

Of course, it wasn't to annoy such a terrible guitar, at least, nothing so forward...

"That goddamn yes-man! That scoundrel! That beetle!"

She played a fortississimo so that others wouldn't hear her cursing him.

The two hadn't exchanged any words since the break ended.

And that day had been a dramatic chance meeting, too.

She felt that the world probably had this idea in their heads that said, "*Regardless of how kind the representative is, he should ignore such a delinquent girl altogether*".

"Why aren't you here for practice?! Do you even know how much time you have left?!"

However the reality was, or rather, the reality inside Kazusa was the exact opposite. Kitahara seems to have been the reason for her having fallen into this cramp.

Certainly for the past several days, Kitahara had pretty much ignored Kazusa calling out to him.

But that wasn't because of anything like, "*He's ignoring me regardless of what I say*".

From her point of view, just about everything he's been doing has been wrong.

I could care less about "good morning".

Same goes for "farewell".

As well as "did you do your homework".

"I'd like you teach me how to play the guitar again..."

Why won't he at least say something like that...?

"That's why you aren't going to get any better! You haven't got a clue!"

She'd been guiding him from the second music room for about 22 days, coming up against a brick wall.

She devoted her abilities in the piano, bass, drums, as well as all her qualities, sense, and genius. However, as expected, that endeavoring genius still wouldn't show his strength in that string instrument.

She hadn't quite gotten a grasp on the limits of his ability, nor its potential, or how fast it would develop.

It reminded her of when since she was a child, her friends would slowly drop out of piano classes, and she slowly became frustrated with being unable to socialize with others.

Which was why Kazusa was growing even more irritated.

When she thought back on that past, perhaps she was pushing too much in the first place.

An instructor with not so much... rather, no perseverance at all.

Her experience doing this... or rather, her lack of communication skills brought on by miscommunication.

... besides, she hadn't made any appointments with him, nor does he know who this teacher really is. In that way, he's not even aware that this was a method of teaching him.

... and the more she pondered it, she felt he would have probably given some lecture like, "*Come on, that's too much*".

"You're such a rank amateur... you need a better sense of the trouble you're in...!"

Restless, she murmured such insincere words. Fearing that they might actually be reality, she threw herself into a vicious cycle bringing forth even more restlessness.

Of course, Kazusa hadn't realized.

That within her, great signs had begun to sprout.

She had ignored her restlessness, irritation, and anger over "*someone else's problems*" for the past several years.

"Morning. As always, you're five minutes late."

"....."

"And your eyes are red. Rare of you to stay up late at night, Touma. Did you sleep so much during the day that you couldn't sleep at night?"

"....."

"Ah, also next week will be the proficiency test pre... ah, sorry. Forget about that."

"... haaaaahhh..."

"Anyways, try hard today... hey, don't sleep so soon. What'd you come to school for?"

She had finally gotten through all the crap the homeroom teacher threw at her. Hearing him say those words without a second thought made her weary, throwing herself flat onto the desk in an exaggerated way.

"... you really are sleepy. What did you do last night?"

"....."

——*Whose fault do you think this is?*

Though I'm going to keep this grumble of mine in.

Just like Kitahara pointed out, I couldn't sleep at all last night with these thoughts I'm not used to.

He's so busy he can't practice, and even if he practiced, he can't get better. Even more, this is all about Kitahara this class representative who's carefree helpless, not caring about this triple handicap.

And yet Kitahara this class representative who doesn't care about this at all is so carefree helpless with this kind of triple handicap.

"Suwa will be in for first period. I think you should at least pretend to be awake for now."

"....."

——*Do you even get it?*

You're not gonna make it to the school festival!

Those modest "memories" you're looking for could disappear in an instant!

Kazusa kept thinking like this, ignoring the glance at her.

——*I guess I have to tell him directly.*

I need to throw this reality onto him, just like the summer break...

Last night. No, yesterday afternoon. No, no, since this week, I've been more restless, angry, and going in circles than he is, so I can't get anything done.

— *But isn't that just a bit too meddlesome?*

It's like I'm doing the same Kitahara is.

Besides, why the hell do I have to do this anyway?

What reason do I have to be helping this idiot...

"..... no, I do..."

"? Do what?"

"Shut up, it's got nothing to do with you."

"... all right, all right."

— *Exactly how much crap have you gotten through to deal with this idiot?*

Shouldn't you at least return the favor to him?

Kazusa was very tired. Maybe it was because of that tiredness that her priorities got reversed.

— *Yeah, I'll tell him.*

Point out each and every one of his problems.

I'll tell him that in a nice, but really mean and shameless way.

Since it's music. I can do that.

Like I'm gonna fall behind this idiot because of studies.

Yeah, that's right.

I'll corner him so he'll never touch the guitar again.

To Kazusa, this idiot's goal of a live performance has no chance.

It was doomed to failure anyway, and to her it was a waste of time.

For over a month she hadn't gotten any sleep doing this special training of hers. No matter how tense or broken she was, or rather, no matter how many times she lost consciousness, her body would just react and start playing again to recall her experiences.

Up until two years ago that was normal. She didn't think it was hard or painful.

She was uncompromising and diligent with him when it came to just his guitar playing.

— *Don't hate me, Kitahara...*

Both of us have bad luck, see.

That's what Kazusa told herself.

She wouldn't have gotten this involved if not for music.

She should have thrown away her pride from two years ago... actually, she just remembered it just now.

— *If that's how it is, then this should be quick.*

I'll start this today after school...

"Hey, Touma, could you stay behind for a bit?"

"..... eh?"

And then, after school...

Kazusa was beaten to the punch.

"I have something to discuss... when no one's around."

"J-Just the two..... of us?"

"Well, I guess so? You prefer that too, right, Touma?"

"Wha...?!"

Somehow he managed to invite her without anyone noticing, or suspecting that the two would be alone. Kazusa was more flustered than she needed to be, being invited in such a grandiose way; especially since this took advantage of the fact everyone was all focused on lessons during class time.

"Ki-Ki-Ki..."

"Later, Haruki. Be sure to take physics notes for me tomorrow."

"Later... and hey, return the favor, would you?"

"Bye, bye~, Kitahara-kun!"

"Yeah, later~."

"..... tahara?"

However, in spite of Kazusa's violent restlessness, the classmates ignored her and just passed by. They just waved at Kitahara, figuring he was used to this.

To them, they weren't jeering at her at all. They just figured the delinquent was ignoring the meddling class representative. That's what they perceived, smiling and gazing from a distance.

"Well, be sure to lock the door, class rep."

"Don't worry, I'll lock it. Take care."

In other words, they had no kind of misunderstanding.

"....."

Though Kazusa should have desired for someone to have pried a bit too deep for their own good. Somehow, she didn't feel quite satisfied, being in a difficult age where she'd feel just a tiny bit of humiliation.

Were they all confident in the class representative's personality, or did the delinquent's dislike of people just sink in...?

"Well then, what I wanted to talk about..."

"Eh?!"

And before she knew it, within those unsatisfied thoughts of hers, the two of them were the only ones in the classroom.

In other words, Kazusa followed his suggestion of *"could you stay behind for a bit?"*...

"I'm sorry for talking to you like this just after the break. Somehow I've been really busy..."

"!... I'm going home!"

"Eh? Why?"

"If your'e so busy, then there's nothing to talk to me about!"

Besides, I had something to talk about too.

"Well sure I am, but it's just for a little bit."

"Shut up. I said I'm going home, so don't get in my way."

Even though him talking to her on the way home from homeroom should have been a godsend...

"Weren't you going to hear me out before you went home...?"

"What kind of delusion did you throw yourself into, you idiot? You should know I'm not one that listens to you, idiot. You really are a real idiot."

"Come on... look Touma, what about during the summer break...?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, okay?"

"... hey."

Kazusa was very impatient, having totally strayed from what she originally intended.

"Anyways, I'm really busy. Like I'm gonna be listening to whatever nonsense you're spouting. Get out of my way, already."

A scenario where she's alone with a guy in the classroom at evening was probably thousands of times too much for her, compared to anyone else, or rather, the guy in front of her...

"Look, I'm telling you this won't take too much time..."

"And if I told you to move...?!"

"Ah, there you are, Haruki~!"

"?!"

An abrupt voice came within the silence of these two. She was so startled, her heart skipped a beat.

"Chikashi? Weren't you going home?"

"Ah..."

If Kazusa had calmed down for a moment, she'd have noticed that Kitahara's good friend Hayasaka had barged in with a rather friendly voice.

"No way I can. Not until I take you with me, see."

"..... eh?"

And she would have noticed what his friend's goal was.

"Hey, come on, not again..."

"Look, I thought that idea yesterday was great, see? But the exec committee guys just started going on about this and that..."

"So just me saying yes isn't good enough for them...?"

"Come on, Haruki! You're the only one who can keep them from going on like that!"

"No, I'm not part of the committee..."

"This isn't the time to be saying that! The school festival'll be in trouble!"

"You don't really care that much about it, do you?"

"....."

And, Kazusa finally understood.

When it comes to this sort of development, Kitahara would most certainly say...

"Sorry, Touma... could you wait a little bit?"

"Who's waiting for whom?"

I'll just be blunt like that.

"Look, I'll be done soon. Just give me ten minutes!"

"Yeah, yeah, this won't take more than five. Come on, let's go, Haruki!"

"L-Look... Chikashi's calling me..."

"I'm gonna be back home in five minutes."

"T-Touma..."

Yeah, just blunt like that. In such a deadpan tone.

I won't even show my anger at all.

"We'll just be gone for a bit and we'll be back before you know it! Come on, come on!"

"Where'd you come up with that... hey, don't pull on me! Look, I'll be back soon, so..."

"....."

"Ha-Haha..."

"....."

"Come on already, Haruki!"

"Y-Yeah..."

Kazusa had already started preparing to go home. She turned her back on Kitahara, the school festival executive committee *"head, even though he's not"*. This was the second day in the row Hayasaka had tugged him away.

And then, several seconds later, a certain someone had taken far too much time to control her breath...

"..... I'm going home."

But, she was so tired, so all she did was drop her shoulders.

The time was now 5 PM.

The falling sun soaks the place in red, coming in at an angle from the window.

"....."

Kazusa had remained in her seat despite saying "*I'm going home*" an hour and a half ago. She laid down on the desk, staring at the evening sky in this room where silence remained.

She had spent time idling here; about nine times that of those "*ten minutes*", and eighteen times that of those "*five minutes*". The scene of the bright classroom being soaked in red burned into her eyes in real-time.

"....."

She wanted to leave the classroom so many times.

At one point she made it to the shoe rack and changed shoes.

Even so, for some reason she didn't go any further, and when she did head back in a hurry, she cursed her own feet many times.

"....."

Even without having had any sleep, she didn't even take a break.

She only kept wondering what it is that he had to "*say*".

Maybe he recognized his lack of skill, and wanted her to train him?

But if he felt that way, perhaps he wouldn't have been dragged to the executive committee?

Perhaps he discovered who the "*Second Music Room Owner*" was?

What would he say if he actually did?

What would she say if he asked her such a thing?

What kind of feelings would he hold towards her?

And as a result, what kind of words would he tell her...?

"..... like I know."

Strongly murmuring something that no one would hear, Kazusa felt so miserable being put in an impossible situation, continuing to wait for the male classmate in the evening classroom.

The time was now... 7 PM.

The slightly hastened sunset finally fell, and the first star began to shine in the darkened sky.

".....!"

Like that, Kazusa had remained in her seat despite saying "*I'm going home*" three hours and thirty minutes ago. She laid down on the desk, staring at the starry sky in this room where silence, and now darkness, remained.

".....~!"

It'd become quite troublesome to move now.

The security guards had finally come around.

Even so, she made up a big lie as *"Touma-san's daughter"*. Claiming that she was part of the remaining crew for the school festival executive committee, somehow she managed to continue waiting.

"..... ha-haha..."

She laughed at how faithful of a dog she was to continue waiting.

"I have something to discuss..."

Because she was told to *"sit"*, she continued to wait sitting on the classroom chair.

"Could you stay behind for a bit?"

Because she was told to *"wait"*, she never left the school building.

The idiot class representative would treat her like a dog for behaving even a little modest only in times of need.

What was the most stupid about this was that she was a little more at ease here compared to other people who spend time at home.

"..... I'm going. I'm really going."

Even so, Kazusa swore to herself.

"Just give me ten minutes!"

As long as he doesn't come back in ten minutes, anyway.



The time was now... 8:30 PM.

She wasn't sure exactly how the harvest moon picked its days... but the moon up in the sky was a particularly full circle.

Indeed, she wouldn't be able to see this kind of scenery if she hasn't waited at the classroom this long.

Which was why Kazusa reflected on this beautiful sight she happened to see by chance...

"What the hell is that idiot doing~~~~?!"

... well, she was supposed to.

Shouting, she kicked over some desks, the roars of which echoed down the empty hallways.

"I'm really sorry about yesterday!"

"..... I'm going home."

"Ahh!! Wait, wait!"

The following day just before classes.

Kazusa did spot the class representative at a distance, waiting for someone at the school gates. She could only return an unpleasant frown when he came over to apologize to her directly.

"Really, I'm sorry. It took a little bit longer than I thought it would with Chikashi."

"Like I know. I went home right away."

"I-I see..."

Ignoring his excuses, Kazusa started walking away from the school campus.

In other words, talking with Kazusa meant that he was going to also be late...

"And?"

"Hmm?"

"... I'm just wondering, but when did that end?"

"Ah, well... like I said, just a little bit."

"..... guess I'm going home."

"Ahh! Just wait, already!"

She knew that *"little bit"* was a complete lie.

But as she was *"supposed"* to have gone home straight away, she wasn't able to point that out as her own stress distancing her away from school.

"Sorry, that little bit was a bit of a lie..."

"Just be honest."

"Umm, it ended around 9."

"H..... hmmmmmm~..."

Kazusa's disappointment led her to leaving at around 8:50 PM...

Her irritation only quadrupled at realizing she could have waited just another ten minutes.

"And, then I had to clean up the desks and seats, so I left the campus at about 9:30..."

"Seems... like an earthquake."

"With just our class?"

"Well, whatever the case, it's not my problem."

Which was why she swore to not apologize about that at all.

"Ah, I'm sorry to ask, but today after school..."

"No. Forget it. Waste of time."

And she moved to never hear a single word from this guy again...

"... was what I was gonna say, but could you spare some time right now?"

"....."

Though she had been firm in doing so, she was asked something that was hard to turn down, and again lost her words.

"The roadside or the park is fine. You mind listening?"

He was indeed cunning and sharp, and it was something she would forgive.

"You'll be late blowing time with me, won't you?"

"... then how about we start heading back to school?"

"....."

He was indeed irrational and stubborn, and it was something she found quite disgraceful.

"We can make it if we run after I'm done. That's how short this is."

"....."

"Besides, Touma, you came to school quite early today..."

"If you have business with me, then make it quick. Don't emphasize every little thing, you idiot."

In the end, she said nothing about the two consecutive sleepless nights she had over such anger, and couldn't help but yield.

"I know this is a bit late you see, but I wanted to thank you for your help during the summer break."

"... why do you have to come annoyingly chasing me over something so dumb?"

"Maybe it's that way to you, but it's not to me."

"...!"

Taking a seat at a small park bench on the roadside, Kazusa felt that this felt like a little bit of a date. The words that Kitahara said also had that same kind of impact.

"I was really happy. I didn't think there was anyone who was that interested in me playing the guitar."

"Even I'm not interested. Just the noise was a bother."

"I think I told you before, but I started playing the guitar this year. And it was all self-taught. Like you said, Touma, I have some weird habits with it..."

"That's not a habit, I think that's just the limit of your abilities."

"Whatever it is, anyways I was happy, and you really were of help... thank you."

"..... whatever."

Her face was red.

Kazusa had never heard words like *"I was happy"* or *"thank you"* from anyone for the past couple of years. It was so embarrassing, her entire body started itching. It was another feeling she experienced for the first time.

"To be honest, I was in a bit of a bind. No matter how much I practiced during the break, I never felt like I was getting better."

— — *That's okay. That's not your imagination at all.*

"But, since that day it feels like it's had an effect. Well, it was only a little bit, anyway."

— *That's also not your imagination. You really did get a little better.*

"A little more and maybe I can finally get it... maybe playing got a little bit interesting or something."

— *If that's how you feel, then play more. Practice. You shouldn't rely so much on other people.*

"....."

Yes, even though he has so many painful words to bear.

For some reason, she never felt the urge to interrupt him at all.

She was completely silent, only listening to him.

Listening to his praise.

Listening to how much she had been of help to him.

"That's why I'm grateful. I'm in your debt. I know it's annoying, but thank you."

"....."

Listening to the sweet words he had which weren't really that of a confession.

Because Kazusa loved sweet things like nameraka pudding...

"So, here."

"Eh...?"

And, with a blunt attitude, Kitahara Haruki brought out a paper package from his bag.

"Hopefully this would be of interest to you..."

Simple paper packaging that he would put together, but it contained his strength, nervousness, and sincerity.

... even if it were explained as the work of the devil, she had to accept it.

TL Note: Literally, this was a reference to the [Amanojaku](#)

"Kitahara..."

".....!"

This time, his face was red.

The sweat on his face couldn't be seen as coming from the late summer heat.

"Umm, what, do you mean by this..."

"You'll know when you open it."

She couldn't believe it given his style and appearance...

This was the first time Kazusa was approached so directly.

Besides, she never felt like this at any time other than when she was practicing the piano.

She stopped feeling like this for people because she stopped facing the piano.

Which was why...

"....."

Even though she had provoked, rejected, or ridiculed people, she remained silent. Quickly snatching the package from his hand, she immediately opened it up with a serious expression.

Because this was filled with his sincerity, she also forgot the words she had to say to him...

"... so, what is this?"

"Green Leaf Publication's Sprouting Series 16, English Grammar

Fundamentals."

"..... oh?"

The paper packaging... rather, the bookstore paper bag was crumpled up.

"I've been looking hard for it. It's not a major publication, so only small stores handle it, see."

It was a reference book.

"But the stuff in it is good. I used it during middle school. It was really useful even when I was taking exams."

And for middle school students, even.

"I hope you'd find it interesting..."

"....."

"Well then, let's get to school. We can make it if we..."

"Wait, let me ask you a question first."

"Hmm? What?"

"Why give me this...?"

Certainly it was a direct question.

Though it was more of a hardball from a distance.

"Well you know, Touma. The day before yesterday, Takemura-sensei said you didn't have any English grammar foundations..."

"....."

Not like it would be of much help to me.

Besides, I'd just ignore it no matter how much they annoyed me.

... no matter which class.

"That's why after classes that day, I went to the northern parts of Onjuku."

"The day before yesterday..."

The day that Kazusa waited in vain in the second music room...

The reason why he didn't always practice wasn't because of the school festival executive committee taking him in, but something like this...?

Finding something useless like this...?

"Ah, I'm not trying to make fun of you just because it's meant for middle schoolers. You can't buy something average when it comes to something like this."

"....."

"Right now Touma, you feel as if you're saying, *"I don't understand a thing"*. When that happens, you should go right back to the basics of basics. Once you get a grasp of it, you'll advance so much it's surprising."

"....."

"Well, yeah. Actually, what made me remember this was..."

"..... it..."

"Eh?"

"Are you... an idiot?"

It was dizzying.

"... I'd figured you'd say something like that, Touma. You shouldn't be ridiculing other people."

"Leaving your guitar practice aside just to look for reference books?"

"Eh?"

She figured that his attitude not really caring for how tight it was going to be with the school festival wasn't something that could be helped.

His attitude was something you couldn't speak bad of for relying on others.

And yet...

"I told you to play, didn't I? Play every day. Not for ten hours, but at least ten minutes, and don't even slack off."

The sound of that off-key guitar in the music room during the summer break.

"I told you you're not good enough because you aren't putting enough effort. Even if it's for a short period of time, as long as you practice seriously you'll get better."

"Touma..."

"You haven't changed at all, Kitahara... do you plan on going like this to the school festival...?"

Regardless of her poor choice of words, but for him to have ignored even the words that were conveyed...

"But, well..."

"No *well*, you didn't even listen to a single thing I said..."

"Next week's the proficiency test, you know?"

"....."

"So right now I have something more important to deal with than the guitar. This isn't the time to be worrying about how I'm..."

It was something he'd been telling her many times up until now.

Whether it was the athletic festival, summer break, or school festival, he'd always make sure to advise people of any lessons or exams.

"Come on... don't tell me you've been studying all this time for the exams, without practicing at all?"

"The main part of being a student is studying, right?"

A conviction that he would never break, no matter what happens.

It was not wrong in any sense at all. Or rather, in that way, it was an insistence of his that was far more correct than hers.

"Fine."

That's why Kazusa understood.

"I see, well we'd better get..."

"I'm going home."

"Eh...?"

This idiot is...

No, I figure I'll never understand this genius of his.

"Anyways, I'll take this thing. I'll be sure to use it."

"I, I see. That's go..."

"So... I'm fine now, so don't ask me to teach you anything again, okay?"

"H, hey, Touma...?"

Getting up from the bench, Kazusa no longer had any interest or business as she rushed off. Kitahara was dumbfounded, watching her leave.

"Wait a second... where are you going?"

"Oh yeah, be sure to tell the homeroom teacher this."

The expression she held had the exact same feeling she had for a while now.

"I'm going to be studying extra hard for the proficiency tests, so I'd like to stay home, okay?"

She was irritated with the frustration of not being able to understand him when she wanted to...

Of course, she didn't go home right away.

Kazusa couldn't stay in such a lonely place, even though it wasn't even the middle of night.

So she randomly walked around places in the Minamisuetsugu shopping district, wearing her school uniform on a weekday in broad daylight.

Sometimes she'd see clothes and accessories that she liked, swiping her card without even looking at the price tag.

Having money on hand, she spent about half of it at the arcades.

As a newbie at shooting and fighting games, Kazusa blew away 100-yen coins quickly in the span of several seconds. When she suddenly got better thanks to her sense, at some point she ran out of coins and had to go crane games. But then she realized both her hands were so filled with prizes, she couldn't move very well.

The day was pretty much over when she left the arcades, but she didn't feel like returning home.

Throwing her goods in a coin locker, she went about aimlessly on the streets again.

There were more students on the street at night than at day. Because of that and her beauty, there were more guys trying to ask her out.

Two guys at the station, two in the shopping district, one in the back alley...

Kicking away three guys, throwing vulgar abuses at one, and getting into an argument with another who was embarrassed at the people surrounding the scene.

Usually she'd have ignored the city altogether and avoided trouble, but Kazusa was a little more in a foul mood than she usually was.

In other words, she was ticked off...

"Haa..."

In the end, she got home past 10 PM.

She lay down on her bed in uniform, and in an instant her head grew hazy.

Maybe having insomnia for the past two nights was finally kicking in, or maybe the five nameraka puddings she just had filled her stomach with had satisfied her...

— —I'll definitely get sleep today.

Even if it's morning, tomorrow, or any day.

I'll just keep sleeping. I could care less about the proficiency tests.

Because there's nothing more I have to bother with.

No worries in my mind at all.

No reason to worry about that guy at all...

"Mm..."

Laying down with her brain and eyes half-closed, she stretched her hand out for the school bag she had just thrown on the bed.

There wasn't a lunch box. The things she bought were in another bag. Of course she wasn't going to do any homework.

But she hadn't a clue what it was she was looking for as she unconsciously opened her bag...

"... huh?"

Even though the contents of her school bag hadn't changed, she suddenly felt out of place.

Almost nothing was in this bag.

Just her handkerchief, her wallet, and candy.

Other students would have writing utensils or textbooks.

If there wasn't anything put in here in the first place, there wouldn't be a problem...

"..... wha?"

Even so, the unease built up in her.

She started thinking of the reason, going through her frozen mind.

First off, why was it that she opened her bag in the first place...?

"..... ahh..."

After thinking for almost a minute, she finally found the source of her discomfort.

In this bag that wasn't supposed to have anything, there was something this morning that was supposed to be put in but wasn't.

"Green Leaf Publication's Sprouting Series 16, English Grammar Fundamentals."

The bookstore paper bag...

"... oh, it's just that..."

Coming to that conclusion, Kazusa sighed in both disappointment and relief.

It wasn't any kind of loss like a discovery of the century or anything.

She had kept it out of her memory long ago anyway.

"Haha..."

She let a painful smile break over being unconsciously worried over something ridiculous like that.

Besides, it was rather useless. She wouldn't be using it, though burning it would make her look bad. Second-hand bookstores wouldn't buy it, and throwing it out would be a pain.

If she dropped it somewhere outside, then it's saved her a lot of grief.

Besides, she didn't care about the global environment.

"....."

Which was why Kazusa once again closed her eyes without delay.

In the usual brilliance of her room.

Praying that tomorrow would be a bit of a better day.

... though she hadn't any intent to wake up tomorrow.

"Umm... we're going to be closing up soon..."

"Shut up, don't talk to me. I'm really busy."

"Please, miss..."

The Minamisuetsugu Goodies Restaurant.

Kazusa was once again in this place, having eaten nameraka pudding here several hours ago.

But she wasn't here right now to order any meals, take a break, or kill time...

"If you want to go home, then find it for me. It's this big of a paper bag. It had some logo of a bookstore from up north..."

"But miss, we've told you many times we haven't seen such a thing fall here..."

"Really? Not even under the seats? The kitchen? You sure you crouched and checked all the floors?"

"Miss, you're the only one who's doing that, aren't you...?"

"And you're supposed to be working here, too. You need to also look hard for it too."

"Sigh, I'm sorry..."

The employee had a nameplate that read "*Satou*". He had long gone past the attitude used to serve customers, instead speaking to her in a frank, miserable way.

He seemed like the kind of guy who would be the store manager, as if he were reflecting on the ridiculousness of being the last guy left behind tending to a customer's problems pushed onto him.

"Maybe it really isn't here after all..."

"Umm, is whatever it is you're looking for that important?"

"Not anything like that at all. What are you saying?"

"..... the same goes for you, miss."

She should have closed her eyes back then.

She should have forgotten about that book and about him without any grief or regrets, almost as if she were free...

"It's just that I couldn't get any sleep."

"Even I'm going to have trouble getting sleep tonight..."

Which was why this was, really, something she worried about.

The slightly bewildered face that he had at the time.

The bald-faced lie of a promise she made by saying "*I'll be sure to use it.*".

She worried that something just a little bad might stir up in her dreams.

—*Anyways, I've finished what I came to do.*

I feel better just by looking for it anyway.

"We haven't received anything like that here."

"... I, see."

Having left the family restaurant, she was at the police box in front of the Minamisuetsugu train station.

—*I was just checking to see if it happened to be there.*

Not like it was going to spend any time or anything.

Kazusa kept making these annoying excuses to herself, standing there in her school clothes while timidly speaking to a uniform policeman.

... a particular face came to mind that could even be in this profession in the future.

"If you happen to find it, please contact me. You have my phone number, right?"

"Sure..."

The policeman responded to her in a more cordial manner than she would have expected.

He also checked the area around the police box, and confirmed that nothing had been found.

"But it's a reference book sold in a bookstore normally, right? Plus it wasn't dropped with anything else, it's just the book. I don't think there'll be anyone reporting it."

"....."

It's just that, she never forgot the severity of this reality revealed to her.

However, it was pretty much a comment that was quite natural.

And besides, even if she did find it herself, it wasn't like she was going to pick it up the moment she realized it was a book.

In other words, everything that Kazusa was doing right now was for naught...

"It's not even that expensive, so it's better you go and buy it again..."

"That's not really the meaning behind it."

"Meaning?"

"..... what I mean is, it's not necessary to go that far."

At that moment, Kazusa wondered whether she was interrupting the policeman, or if she was interrupting herself...

More than likely she didn't understand it herself, nor would anyone.

"Ah..."

It finally started raining.

The skies might have started raining when she reached Minamisetsugu a couple of hours ago, but it finally reached its limit and began pouring down.

It was pretty much the dead of night, growing late and probably the day would change soon.

It wasn't at a point where the last trains for the day were about to leave. Kazusa stood at the edge of the arcade area, looking up at the rain.

She was supposed to have left the police box, toward the station, and back home. Instead, just like with the school gates this morning, she ended up in the exact opposite place.

She looked through her goods she stashed in the coin locker at noon, checked the inside of the arcades where she blew her cash, and kept pacing back in forth in the shopping district where she bought stuff.

But it was like looking for a single grain in the middle of the desert. Kazusa wasn't able to find it at all, even now.

"It really is getting late..."

That murmur of hers no longer had a sigh or any complaints mixed in it compared to before.

Every time those words of hers gave a nuance of having given up, the tone she had would gradually disappear.

Her body would remember the voice and expression she had that day when she abandoned the world.

Even though she looked and went as far as talking to people.

Even though she went to the police.

All for a single book she hadn't even used.

For something she could buy if she went as far as Onjuku tomorrow.

"I'll head home..."

She's pretty much had it with this stupid whim of hers that didn't even fit her.

Having walked for many hours since noontime, her body began to cry from running around.

It hurt. It was heavy. She was sleepy. She was hot, and cold at the same time.

The sound pitch of the rain began to rise.

A welcome rain that cooled down her body from a bit of the late summer heat, as well as the heat from running around.

But if she stayed in it for too long, this rain would turn into something detestable, slowly snatching away her body heat.

That's why, this time, Kazusa...

—*I wasted quite a bit of time, didn't I?*

But, it's fine now...

This time I'm going home, taking a bath, sleeping and forgetting everything.

Yeah, it's fine to forget it all.

Because I tried my best.

I did everything I could.

That's why it's fine now.

I can just forget about him now...

".....!!"

This time, she left the arcade and ran through the rain.

... indeed, she wasn't going in the direction of the station.

Instead, she was headed towards... the School of Houjou University.

—*At any rate, I'm probably not going to be going to school tomorrow.*

So there's no problem in staying up a little bit longer, right?

The excuses she made to herself began growing more and more agonizing.

"Why...?"

It had past 3 AM.

Even though the rain was heavy, she endured it.

"Why can't I find it....?!"

She screamed out with the deep resentment she had, but her voice was blocked out by the sound of water tapping hard against the street.

She spent many, many hours looking...

From the arcades to the the park where she parted ways with him.

From the park, to the school gates just to make sure.

From the school gates, to a spot where she might have dropped it at the station.

At the stores she shopped at. The arcade. The family restaurant.

... she kept rotating through these places many, many times.

"You idiot..."

The chances of her finding it were minute from the start.

She knew that.

But, even so, it didn't sit well with her.

That was why the anger she had was directed towards herself for what she did for the first half of the day.

Towards the fact that she traveled between school and home all the time.

Towards the fact it was all she did except for today.

Towards how she treated the first present she received from him several hours ago.

Towards not knowing how much of a rebound this would have for being even a little careless.

She wanted to convey these feelings to her past self, for foolishly lying in the past.

— — *I'm such an idiot, aren't I?*

Why am I running around like this?

Getting involved with him means I can't be like I always am...

The rain fell.

Without mercy, Kazusa pierced through the violent sound of water tapping countless times, through the school route that should have been silent in the middle of the night.

Even so, she glared at the skies and clouds with such a defiant attitude, taking in the painful and heavy pressure right in front of her.

She just looked straight ahead without flinching, as she pierced her head, her hair, her face, and even her own eyes through the rain.

That stimulus and pain... was explained by the red stain in Kazusa's eyes.

"... not yet..."

She dragged along her legs which could no longer run, and still, she would trace back her steps.

She would not give up.

Because if she did, that line would cut.

The line that connected two people.

Even though it was a line that she should have decided not to tie herself to in the earlier part of the day.

She's not sure whether he was aware of it. In addition, it was a line that she had continued to deny.

Even so, she was no longer really sure of this long, lingering feeling somewhere in her heart.

"Haha...!"

It was a rather complete accident.

In the small park along the way to school, where the two parted.

At the entrance, by the stairs that had just five steps.

And deep within it...

Deep within the bushes, as if taking shelter from the rain, was a paper bag whose faint marking from the northern bookstores was blotted out.

"Ahaha, haha....., it-it's here..."

She had completely missed this spot even though she had gone over it many times, only having noticed it because her feet were dragged down by the stairs.

And because at the time, as any person would, she used both her hands to support her as she collapsed.

She hit her knees. She grazed her thighs. Even her back, her chest, and with the exception of her palms, her entire body was in pain.

Such pain hadn't really registered with her until that moment, when her vision fell to ground level, catching sight of the bag.

For the first time in many years, she thanked the heavens for letting her be a pianist. She thanked them for engraving such a trait into her body, even now.

Kazusa lay down, not moving for a while. Finally, half her body rose to climb the stairs, grabbing the mud-enveloped paper bag, and holding it deeply against her chest.

Perhaps it was to protect it from the rain, but as she was soaking wet, one couldn't even imagine that was the reason.

While she understood this well, she continued to treat this inanimate object with such love.

Because to her tonight, this inanimate object was the thing she sacrificed everything for.

"You see that... I found it, Kitahara..."

For a while, she timidly opened the paper bag that touched against her chest.

Though one would say that the shrubs protected it, indeed it was no longer in good condition, the paper bag being soaked in black, and the book text itself having blotted away.

But, that wasn't something Kazusa was concerned about.

Because the book being in good condition meant nothing to her.

It was just something *"that would be nice if she found it"...*

"..... what's, this?"

She stopped as she turned the pages to confirm something.

She found a piece of paper slipped within it. In handwriting.

"Ha, ha..."

It was meant for the person who wasn't even going to be using this book. A message that had such little chance of reaching her.

"Hahaha... ahahahaha..."

Even though he was attentive, he didn't even give it enough consideration.

Even if one thought of it as trying to look cool, in the end it was far too embarrassing, and getting in the way, nothing would be conveyed.

The stupidity of that idiot class representative made Kazusa break into a laugh.

All the anger, her impatience, and irritation gushed out from her heart naturally.

"You're an idiot... you really are an idiot, you know...!"

Even so, she wanted to continue smiling today for now.

Because, she accomplished something.

She found a grain in the middle of a desert.

An event so great that it could be considered even a miracle...

Well, to Kazusa, it was so great it made her comfortable with believing in fate.

"Touma..."

"....."

The next day. Kazusa laid flat down on her desk in the classroom, not moving an inch.

"U-Umm... Touma, well, it's about yesterday..."

"Don't talk to me right now."

"Uu..."

The class representative tried to find a moment to talk with her once she came, but that lightning-quick work of his ended up being one step behind.

What happened yesterday.

Not knowing what happened with her, why it was that she was angry.

Even if it were his fault to begin with, there was no logic behind her skipping classes.

And he had a timid but powerful will to try and mend his relationship with her somehow.

"Just... just for a minute, would you listen?"

He had too many things to ask, that he wouldn't take no for an answer.

That's why he stubbornly tried to talk to her like he always did, knowing that she would hate him even more...

"I'm sleepy, talk to me next week."

"Eh?"

"Just let me sleep for today. Don't dare wake me up, okay?"

"Touma...?"

And out of the blue, she added a condition to talking to her, just like that.

Dodging his questions with an attitude, as if nothing had happened.

In the numerous and various emotions he carried in regards to her, the pain would be one caused by being far too happy.

"All right... good night, Touma."

"Is it okay for you to say that?"

But he didn't know the truth.

Why it was that Kazusa came here in particular.

Or the fact that last night, or this morning, she came home late at night.

Or the fact the moment she came out of the shower, her relief, fatigue, and lack of sleep attacked her at once. Or the fact that if she even closed her eyes for an instant, she'd collapse.

Or the fact that the choice to collapse came to her mind many times.

Or the fact her entire body was in pain from those wounds, and took her another thirty minutes to get to school.

... or the fact that she could sleep in peace only for today right beside someone.

..... or the fact that, of course, it couldn't just be anyone.

That's why he didn't know. And probably he never will.

He'll never learn of faithful dog Kazusa's great adventure last night...

One week later, the School of Houjou University had finally finished up the proficiency tests...

Of all five subjects, Touma Kazusa scored the worst in four of them.

It was much easier to spend time in that closed classroom compared to summertime. She didn't have to turn on the air conditioner; just opening the window was enough to bring about a pleasant atmosphere.

With exams over, the club activities regained their liveliness within the school, and a familiar musical instrument's sound echoed.

Kazusa looked down below from the window behind the curtains as they blew back from the wind. She then returned to the piano, and seated herself well, taking her usual stance.

And as always, she'd wait quietly for 5 PM to pass by.

The evenings would come much more quickly within the first ten days of October.

With exams over, the club activities regained their liveliness... on the first Tuesday.

And it happened to be ten minutes past five.

"..... off-key!"

Kazusa evaluated its performance without even having listened to it for more than a second.

She had waited so long, she wasn't even waiting to listen to the sound.

Simply put, the guitar solo that came ringing through the window was "*WHITE ALBUM*".

Her fingertips reacted much more quickly than usual the moment it hit.

She changed her rhythms and musical intervals from having played classical etudes so far, immediately taking on such an old, popular tune.

And, as if to signal that he should get it together already, she immediately began playing to accompany the guitar.

Perhaps this was selected from the repertoire of songs to dispel the resentment caused by the exams up until now.

It'd been a while since "*WHITE ALBUM*" carried itself along the winds. The melody was so lively and played so clearly, she could almost imagine his enjoyment in playing it. Though it was as if it had degraded, not matching how the lyrics conveyed a painful romance.

But only today, Kazusa threw away such corrections like, "*Don't play it like that*", instead matching her partner's speed, strength, and enjoyment.

This is fine for just today.

It's fine if we have fun. It's fine if we're happy.

It's fine if the two of us are playing...

"...Hmm~?"

Kazusa brought up her tempo, and her partner would follow.

So if she started playing quickly, he'd also be desperate in catching up.

However one would think of it, it'd be too much effort, and result in a massive failure.

Only the worst performance would be brought out, and nothing would remain of the original melody.

But...

"You're..."

Kazusa's expression sparkled like never before.

Because this was far different from usual.

It was so fast, and so strong...

And yet, he didn't even miss a single note.

"What do you mean studying being the main thing... you liar..."

Two weeks later, Mr. Guitar... Kitahara Haruki's abilities had risen since the exams.

Like always, he'd never gotten rid of his habits such as getting too caught up, or dragging around other people. But this important playing ability of his was something he had definitely picked up.

It was obviously a technique that couldn't improve unless one practiced every day.

And it was something you couldn't master unless you got the basics of basics...

—*You idiot... you're just the same like me, then.*

You're more honest with your melody than you are with your words.

You practiced during exam time, didn't you?

You became interested in the guitar even while studying, didn't you?

Instead of reading a reference book, you were reading "that book", weren't you...?

The one memory that was clear to Kazusa was the one late at night in the rain.

The one memo that was placed within the pages of that soaked reference book.

I bought the practice book you told me about, Touma.

It really was so simple to understand, maybe now I can get better.

Thanks to you Touma, now I understand the most fundamental and important thing.

Having said that, I hope this book proves to be the most useful to you.

At least please listen to what your studying seniors say.

Only a little longer until the school festival, and until we graduate, so let's work hard.

-Kitahara

"Kaisaku Publications... Expert Series?"

"It's a practice book geared towards novices, so I'm pretty sure it'll work out for you, Kitahara."

"Did you get better reading this book too, Touma?"

"Of course not. I just have my ability."

"Ah, I see."

"I'm kidding. It wasn't with the guitar, but it did help quite a bit."

"You play things other than the guitar?"

"... that doesn't matter right now."

"Touma...?"

"Come on, hurry up and play. I don't have that much time."

That day during the summer, she casually brought up this book's title while teaching him the guitar.

She read it when she started on the piano... in other words, once she had gotten enough experience, Youko had bought her this piano compilation as a gift.

Certainly her mother had given her only books with kanji characters for three-year olds, but as a brazen young girl who saw fit to show her genius, she'd immediately understand the symbols written in them.

In terms of her reading comprehension, or rather her music comprehension, she was better than anyone in her generation... in other words, a child prodigy.

And those fruits came to bear from such a deep history, from the memories

Her Mother
that Touma Youko engraved into her...

"You missed~! Too bad~!"

Right at the end, when reaching the last verse, the guitar went off-key. Kazusa erupted in laughter with such a scornful smile at this player.

That night, Kazusa stayed up all night like she did a week ago.

But that was not for practicing the piano, nor contemplation, and certainly not studying...

But it was something that one would consider appropriate as night work... it was sewing.

She was working on a large stuffed animal from within the drawer.

The birthday present that Touma Youko sent her two years ago.

A symbol of the estrangement between her and her mother, having been left alone in such a torn-up state.

Kazusa worked hard to stitch up the openings she caused.

When she first started, she kept pricking her hands.

But, as they were hands forged by the piano, they soon picked things up, and as her pace gradually increased, the stitches became much more consistent and tidy.

Even so, she would keep her pace steady even when it was about to get quicker, being cautious about getting too caught up. She wanted to have it sewed up so cleanly such that the stitches wouldn't even be seen.

It wasn't to forgive her mother.

It wasn't to accept the world.

Even so, the stuffed animal... the dog wasn't at fault.

It was because it was certainly her own doing...

The sewed up stuffed animal was a little bit bent and warped.

But its awkward form pulled on her heartstrings.

Because it was so much like a faithful dog that would continue to wag its tail, its feelings never reaching its master.

Which was why Kazusa would check the time it took her to reach school, and sleep within the remaining thirty minutes she had.

It was quite heartwarming when she embraced it.

"I'm heading off."

And just thirty minutes after...

She left her room, saying those words to *"them"*. Them being, the faithful dog on the side of the bed. And in its chest was a book of the name, *""Green Leaf Publication's Sprouting Series 16, English Grammar Fundamentals."*

It was a *"greeting"* she hadn't said for two and a half years.

"... ah~"

Her eyes narrowed at the pouring sunlight from above as she left the house.

The sky wasn't as powerful since it was in the middle of fall, but as she had been up approximately all night, she wanted this gentle sunlight to be a little easy on her.

"I really don't want to go to school..."

Up until now, or at least until last year she never wanted to attend school like this.

But now, her body didn't listen to her grumbling, heading straight to the station.

And her mind, as well as her body reacted with such a pleasant feeling.

"It's such a pain..."

As expected, the only thing left was her defiant mouth. There was no one else within her left for it to be with.

And the clear, fall skies spread above her.

Touma Kazusa... never really hated the skies in the first place.

Epilogue: "November"

- Kitahara Haruki gives everyone a very bad first impression.
- Everyone avoids getting on his bad side.
- Anyone who likes him in the first place are really eager idiots.
- There's been no oddball that's shown up who's like that, and no such person will ever appear.

At least, she thought no one would...

"Touma-san, right?"

"Ogiso... Setsuna..."

But then, she met her.

She met another girl who was looking at him the same way.



WHITE ALBUM 2

